

Revisiting Goal Setting Theory in Team Contexts: A Narrative Review of its Role in Enhancing Team Effectiveness

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Abstract

In contemporary organizational environments characterized by complexity and interdependence, enhancing team effectiveness remains a persistent challenge despite extensive research. While Goal Setting Theory (GST) has been widely recognized as a robust framework for explaining motivation and performance, its application in team contexts has not been sufficiently integrated with broader team effectiveness perspectives. This conceptual paper aims to revisit GST by synthesizing empirical and theoretical insights to examine its role in enhancing team effectiveness. Drawing on a narrative review approach, the paper explores how goal characteristics, particularly specificity and difficulty, alongside participative goal-setting processes, contribute to team alignment, coordination, and performance. The review further highlights that goal setting in contemporary teams is increasingly dynamic and iterative, requiring continuous feedback, adaptation, and integration with team processes and organizational contexts. In addition, the paper acknowledges the importance of extending GST beyond short-term performance outcomes to incorporate team sustainability and well-being. The findings suggest that effective goal setting functions as both a motivational and structural mechanism that supports multidimensional team effectiveness. Practical recommendations are provided to guide organizations in implementing structured, participative, and adaptive goal-setting practices. This paper contributes by offering a more integrated and contemporary understanding of GST in team-based environments.

Keywords: Goal Setting Theory (GST), Team Effectiveness, Participative Goal Setting, Goal Clarity, Team Dynamics, Organizational Behaviour, Team Performance

Introduction

Despite extensive research on team performance, organizations continue to face persistent challenges in achieving consistent team effectiveness, particularly in environments characterized by complexity, interdependence, and uncertainty. Many teams underperform not due to lack of technical capability, but due to misalignment, unclear goals, and ineffective

coordination of interdependent tasks. This issue is critical as teams have become the fundamental unit of performance, responsible for integrating diverse expertise and delivering outcomes that cannot be achieved through individual effort alone (Kozlowski & Bell, 2013; Barrick et al., 2007).

Ineffective teams can result in reduced productivity, poor coordination, and inability to meet organizational objectives. Therefore, team effectiveness is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that able to extend beyond task performance to include team satisfaction, learning, and long-term viability (Yoo et al., 2022; Chiu et al., 2022). This broader perspective highlights that enhance team effectiveness is not only about performance outcomes but also about to sustain collaboration over time.

The importance of addressing this issue is further reinforced by the evolving conceptualization of team effectiveness. Contemporary research recognizes team effectiveness as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond task performance to include team satisfaction, learning, and long-term viability (Yoo et al., 2022; Chiu et al., 2022). This broader perspective highlights that effective teams must not only achieve high performance outcomes but also sustain collaboration and adaptability over time. Ineffective teams can result in reduced productivity, poor coordination, and an inability to meet organizational objectives, making the enhancement of team effectiveness a critical concern for both researchers and practitioners.

Existing research on GST has largely adopted an individual-centric and static perspective, with insufficient attention given to the dynamic, interdependent, and multilevel nature of team environments (Turner et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is limited integration between GST and broader team effectiveness frameworks, restricting a comprehensive understanding of how goal-setting mechanisms interact with team processes, emergent states, and organizational contexts. This disconnect reduces the practical applicability of GST in addressing real-world team challenges, particularly in environments characterized with rapid change and uncertainty.

Therefore, a clear need to revisit and extend GST within team contexts to better reflect the realities of modern organizations. In particular, to understand how goal characteristics and goal-setting processes influence alignment, coordination, and performance in teams is essential for improving team effectiveness in practice (Ramírez-Zavala et al., 2024; Arora et al., 2023).

This study is significant in both theoretical and practical dimensions. From a theoretical perspective, it extends Goal Setting Theory beyond its traditional individual-level focus by integrating it with multidimensional team effectiveness frameworks, thereby able to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how goal-setting mechanisms operate within interdependent team environments (Yoo et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2020). From a practical perspective, the study provides valuable insights for organizational leaders, project managers, and team practitioners who are responsible for coordinating complex and interdependent tasks. By clarifying how goal clarity, participative goal-setting processes, and continuous feedback mechanisms influence team alignment and performance, the study

offers actionable guidance for improving team effectiveness in real-world settings (Peralta et al., 2015; Zwikael & Meredith, 2022).

Accordingly, this paper aims to synthesize empirical and theoretical insights to develop a more integrated understanding of the role of Goal Setting Theory in enhancing team effectiveness. By examining how goal characteristics, participative processes, and dynamic goal adaptation interact within team environments, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive foundation for both future research and organizational practice.

Theoretical Overview

Goal Setting Theory (GST), developed by Locke and Latham (1991; 2002; 2019), remains one of the most influential frameworks for explaining motivation and performance within organizational behaviour. At its core, GST posits that goal-directed behaviour is systematically shaped by the characteristics of the goals themselves. Specifically, individuals and teams tends to demonstrate higher levels of performance when pursue goals that are both clearly defined and sufficiently challenging, as opposed to vague or easily attainable targets.

Over several decades, extensive empirical research has consistently validated the central propositions of GST across diverse sectors. Evidence suggests that specific and challenging goals function as key predictors of motivation, task performance, and overall effectiveness (Burns et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2023; Zwikael & Meredith, 2022). These findings reinforce the robustness of GST as a foundational explanatory model, especially contemporary, complex organizational team settings.

Importantly, GST extends beyond individual-level motivation to encompass team-based dynamics. In increasingly interdependent work environments, where outcomes depend on coordinated effort, the role of goal clarity and alignment becomes even more critical. As such, GST provides a useful theoretical lens for examining how structured goal-setting practices can enhance team effectiveness through improved focus, coordination, and behavioural regulation.

Literature Review

Team Effectiveness

Teams have become the fundamental unit of performance in modern organizations, particularly in contexts characterized by complexity and interdependence. A team is commonly defined as a group of interdependent individuals who work collectively toward shared objectives (Kozlowski and Bell, 2013; Barrick et al., 2007). Extending this view, Cohen and Bailey (1997) emphasized collective accountability and the management of internal and external relationships as defining characteristics of teams.

Team effectiveness is a multidimensional construct. Yoo et al. (2022) conceptualized it in terms of team performance, team satisfaction, and growth experiences. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2022) highlighted both team performance and team viability which deemed as the team's capacity to sustain collaboration over time as key indicators of effectiveness. These perspectives underscored that effective teams are not solely output-driven but must also maintain internal cohesion and long-term functionality.

A central determinant of team effectiveness is the clarity of shared goals. Teams require a common understanding of what must be achieved in order to coordinate effectively. Unclear or conflicting goals can undermine alignment, subsequently leading to inefficiencies and reduced performance. Empirical evidence supports this assertion. Peralta et al. (2015) demonstrated that teams with high goal clarity are better able to translate effort and innovation into better performance outcomes compared to teams with ambiguous objectives. In addition, high levels of goal commitment have been linked to increased productivity and creativity (Aubé & Rousseau, 2005; Peralta et al., 2015). In more strategic contexts, shared vision will positively affect collective team commitment, thereby expected to improve performance (Chai et al., 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that goal clarity and commitment are not merely supportive conditions but foundational mechanisms through which team effectiveness is achieved.

Goal Setting Theory in Team Contexts

Among the core principles of Goal Setting Theory (GST), goal specificity is widely recognized as a critical determinant of effectiveness. Specific goals clarify expected outcomes, reduce ambiguity, and provide a concrete benchmark against which progress can be assessed (Locke & Latham, 2002). In team-based environments, such clarity is particularly critical, as interdependent work requires members to align attention, effort, and behaviour toward shared priorities. Empirical evidence consistently supports the proposition that specific and challenging goals enable progress monitoring while performance by guiding effort, motivation, and commitment (Chai et al., 2017; Jeong et al., 2023).

However, recent team effectiveness literature suggests that the influence of goals extends beyond motivational mechanisms to encompass broader team processes and relational dynamics. Arora et al. (2023) demonstrated that team purpose and goals are closely associated with team roles, team processes, and team relationships, indicated that goal clarity functions as a structural anchor to shape coordination and interaction patterns within teams. Similarly, a systematic review by Ramírez-Zavala et al. (2024) identified common objectives and goals, alongside organizational communication, the involvement and commitment of senior management, resources, as critical success administrative factors to influence team effectiveness in continuous improvement contexts.

Goal Characteristics and Goal-Setting Processes

However, GST does not only emphasize what goals are set, but also how they are established. The theory suggests that both goal characteristics (e.g., specificity and difficulty) and goal-setting processes (e.g., participation) jointly influence commitment and performance outcomes. In this regard, specific and collaboratively developed goals have been shown to enhance both goal acceptance and execution (Chai et al., 2017; Jeong et al., 2023). By providing a clear and collectively understood target, such goals facilitate progress monitoring, adaptive strategy adjustment, and coordinated action among team members.

For the aspect of goal characteristic, Burns et al. (2021) in the education field found that individuals assigned with measurable performance targets significantly outperformed those encouraged to “do their best.” Similarly, in sports, Jeong et al. (2023) demonstrated that structured and specific goal-setting practices led to superior performance outcomes. In digital health contexts, Lee and Lin (2023) showed that goal specificity and perceived difficulty

influenced user engagement and sustained behavioural adherence. These findings collectively reinforced the robustness of GST across diverse contexts for both individuals and teams. Beyond individual-level settings, recent studies further highlight the relevance of GST in complex, applied contexts. Gyepi-Garbrah et al. (2023) emphasized the role of goal-related factors such as self-efficacy, commitment, feedback mechanisms, and situational constraints affect goal implementation. Pritchard-Wiart et al. (2019) underscored the importance of specific, proximal, and meaningful goals in facilitating engagement and observable progress, even in highly individualized environments. Likewise, Zwikael and Meredith (2022) argued that clearly defined project goals enhance decision-making quality, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and complexity.

On the other hand, goal setting process particularly participative goal setting, where team members are actively involved in goal formulation, tends to enhance both the quality and acceptance of goals. Participation fosters dialogue, facilitates clarification, and allows goals to be adapted to operational realities. Empirical evidence supported this perspective. Locke and Latham (2019) reported that teams involved in setting their own goals not only establish higher targets but also achieve superior performance, largely due to the development of more effective strategies. Similarly, Zwikael and Meredith (2022) noted that stakeholder involvement improves decision quality and reduces planning biases, while Pritchard-Wiart et al. (2019) demonstrated that participatory approaches enhance engagement and meaningful progress. Arora et al. (2023) highlighted the interdependence between team goals, roles, processes, and relationships, suggesting that participative approaches contribute to more cohesive and well-integrated team functioning. Likewise, Ramírez-Zavala et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of employee involvement, empowerment, leadership commitment, and resource support in achieving effective teamwork, particularly in complex organizational initiatives.

Dynamic in Goal Setting Theory

Importantly, emerging research indicates that goal setting in contemporary team environments is increasingly dynamic and iterative rather than static. Neubert and Dyck (2016) argued for a more sustainable reinterpretation of goal setting that incorporates broader stakeholder well-being and long-term impact, thereby challenging the theory's traditional emphasis on short-term productivity. In the systematic review of agile teams, Steegh et al. (2025) concluded that team effectiveness in uncertain and rapidly changing environments depends on continuous feedback, stakeholder interaction, shared leadership, and regular goal refinement. Teams operate through recurring cycles of action and reflection, revisiting and adjusting goals to respond to evolving conditions. This perspective extends GST by emphasizing that effective goal setting is not a one-time event but an ongoing, adaptive process embedded within team interaction and learning cycles.

This dynamic view aligns with broader developments in team effectiveness theory, which conceptualize teams as complex, adaptive, and multilevel systems. Turner et al. (2020) argued that team effectiveness should be understood holistically, encompassing not only performance outcomes but also teamwork processes (e.g., communication, coordination, and cooperation) and taskwork processes (e.g., planning and execution). In multiteam systems, effectiveness further depends on the ability to align goals and activities across

interdependent teams, requiring strong coordination, leadership, and integration mechanisms.

Taken together, these insights suggested that goal specificity and participative processes are mutually reinforcing mechanisms within GST. Specific goals provide clarity, direction, and measurable standards, while participative processes enhance ownership, commitment, and contextual relevance. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is contingent upon broader team and organizational conditions, including communication quality, leadership support, coordination structures, and resource availability (Ramírez-Zavala et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2020).

Discussion

Goal Setting Theory (GST) as a central explanatory framework while integrating insights from team effectiveness literature and contemporary developments in team dynamics, reveals that goal setting is not merely a motivational mechanism but a critical structural and relational enabler that shapes how teams align, coordinate, and sustain performance over time.

At a foundational level, GST explains how specific and challenging goals enhance performance by directing attention, mobilizing effort, and enabling self-regulation (Locke & Latham, 1991; 2002; 2019). However, when extended to team contexts, the role of goals becomes more complex due to the interdependent nature of teamwork. Teams require a shared understanding of objectives to ensure coordinated action, and goal clarity serves as a central mechanism that aligns individual contributions with collective outcomes. This reinforces the argument that goal specificity is not only a driver of individual motivation but also a critical coordination mechanism at the team level.

The literature on team effectiveness further expands this understanding by conceptualizing effectiveness as a multidimensional construct that includes team performance, team satisfaction, and team viability (Yoo et al., 2022; Chiu et al., 2022). This suggests that the impact of goal setting should not be evaluated solely based on immediate performance outcomes. Instead, effective goal setting contributes to the development of shared cognition, cohesive interaction patterns, and long-term collaboration among team members. In this regard, goal clarity strengthens the alignment between team inputs and processes, enabling teams to translate effort into performance more effectively (Peralta et al., 2015).

A key insight emerging from this synthesis is the interdependence between goal characteristics and goal-setting processes. While GST emphasizes the importance of specific and challenging goals, the literature consistently demonstrates that the process through which goals are established significantly influences their effectiveness. In particular, participative goal setting will be able to enhance goal acceptance, commitment, and contextual relevance by allowing team members to contribute their knowledge and clarify expectations (Locke & Latham, 2019). This participatory approach strengthens team cohesion and improves coordination by aligning goals with operational realities. Empirical findings further suggest that participative goal setting contributes to the integration of team roles, processes, and relationships, thereby enhancing overall team performance (Arora et al., 2023).

However, the effectiveness of goal setting also extends beyond motivational and participatory mechanisms to include broader organizational and contextual factors. Team effectiveness is influenced by communication quality, leadership support, coordination structures, and resource availability (Ramírez-Zavala et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2020). These factors shape how goals are interpreted, implemented, and monitored within teams. Consequently, goal setting should be understood as embedded within a wider system of team processes and organizational conditions rather than as an isolated intervention.

While traditional applications of GST often assume that goals are relatively stable once established, in contemporary team environments had recognised that the goal setting shall be dynamic and iterative. Teams operate in environments characterized by uncertainty and rapid change, requiring continuous feedback, adaptation, and goal refinement (Steeh et al., 2025). Teams engage in recurring cycles of planning, action, and reflection, revisiting goals to maintain alignment with evolving conditions. This dynamic perspective extends GST by emphasizing that effective goal setting is an ongoing process embedded within team interaction and learning cycles. Another acknowledgement shall be made on GST that challenge its traditional emphasis on short-term performance outcomes. Neubert and Dyck (2016) argued for a broader interpretation of goal setting that incorporates stakeholder well-being and long-term impact. This critique is consistent with contemporary team effectiveness literature, which emphasizes sustainability, adaptability, and team viability as key indicators of effectiveness (Turner et al., 2020). Integrating this perspective suggests that goal setting should not only focus on achieving immediate performance targets but also support long-term team functioning and member well-being.

Taken together, the synthesis of GST, team effectiveness literature, and contemporary team dynamics suggests that the relationship between goal setting and team effectiveness is best understood as a multi-level and dynamic process. Goal specificity provides clarity and direction, participative processes enhance commitment and alignment, and team processes translate goals into coordinated action. These mechanisms operate within a broader organizational context that shapes their effectiveness and sustainability.

Accordingly, this paper contributes to the literature by advancing a more integrated and contemporary understanding of GST in team contexts. It demonstrates that enhancing team effectiveness requires not only setting clear and challenging goals but also embedding goal setting within participative, adaptive, and contextually supported processes. This integrated perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for future research and offers meaningful insights for organizations seeking to improve team performance in increasingly complex environments.

Practical Recommendations to be adopted by Organization

Based on the conceptual synthesis of Goal Setting Theory and team effectiveness literature, several practical recommendations can be proposed for organizations and institutions seeking to enhance team effectiveness.

Establish Participative, Clear, Specific, and Challenging Team Goals

Organizations should ensure that all teams are guided by clearly defined and measurable goals. Goals must specify expected outcomes, performance standards, and timelines to

reduce ambiguity and align team efforts. Avoid vague directives such as “do your best” and instead define concrete performance targets.

Organizations should actively involve team members in the goal-setting process. Facilitate structured workshops or planning sessions where team members can contribute to defining goals. This approach increases ownership, improves goal clarity, and ensures that goals are realistic and aligned with operational conditions.

Align Goals Across Functions and Teams with Leadership Support and Involvement

In interdependent environments, organizations should ensure that goals are aligned across departments and teams. Establish mechanisms to cascade organizational goals into team-level objectives while maintaining consistency and coordination across units.

Leaders should play an active role in guiding, reinforcing, and supporting goal-setting practices. This includes clarifying expectations, providing direction, resolving conflicts, provide resources and ensuring that teams remain aligned with organizational objectives.

Embed Continuous Feedback and Goal Review Mechanisms

Organizations should treat goal setting as an ongoing process rather than a one-time activity. Implement regular review cycles to assess progress, provide feedback, and refine goals based on changing conditions. Organizations should recognize that goals may need to evolve in dynamic environments. Encourage teams to adapt goals based on new information, changing priorities, or external uncertainties rather than rigidly adhering to initial plans.

Organizations should ensure that goal-setting practices do not focus solely on short-term performance outcomes. Incorporate considerations of workload, team sustainability, and employee well-being to maintain long-term effectiveness.

Promote Learning and Reflective Practices

Encourage teams to engage in regular reflection sessions to evaluate what is working and what needs improvement. Learning-oriented practices strengthen team adaptability and improve future performance.

These recommendations translate the theoretical insights of GST into practical, actionable strategies, emphasizing that effective goal setting is not just about setting targets but about how goals are created, communicated, adapted, and supported within teams and organizations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of Goal Setting Theory (GST) in enhancing team effectiveness via integrating theoretical foundations with contemporary insights from team effectiveness literature. The contribution of GST shall extend beyond individual performance to the team level, where goal clarity functions as a critical mechanism for aligning effort, facilitating coordination, and enabling collective action in interdependent work environments, while consider goal setting as multidimensional, dynamic, iterative and team long term sustainability

For future development, this paper suggests the need for further research to explore how GST can be integrated with emerging team effectiveness models, particularly in dynamic, multiteam, and agile environments. Additionally, there is scope to examine how goal-setting practices can balance performance outcomes with long-term team viability and well-being.

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