

Goal orientation in coaching differs according to region, experience, and education

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Abstract

Goal-setting remains a largely unquestioned element of coaching practice. This study examined the goal orientation of 194 coaches in the U.S. and Europe. An analysis of survey results revealed differences according to region, coaching experience, and education. Specifically, coaches in the USA are more goal-oriented than European coaches, and those who have taken a long coaching course are more goal-oriented than those who have learned through experience alone. Goal orientation decreases for more experienced European coaches, but not for U.S. coaches. These findings provide researchers with a reliable measure of goal orientation, and raise questions for further research on goals in coaching.

Key words: goals, goal setting, SMART goals, GROW model, coaching

Introduction

Coaching is generally defined as a process that improves performance (Hamlin, Ellinger & Beattie, 2009), and has been identified as a “goal-directed” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004, p. 11) activity. In coaching practice the use of goal-setting models is commonplace, including SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-bound; Doran, 1981) and GROW (goal, reality, options, will; Whitmore, 2002).

Despite the prevalence of goal setting in coaching, only limited research has been conducted on this topic. Grant (2003) found that coaching enhances goal attainment. Grant and Cavanagh (2007) developed the Goal-Focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire which measures competencies including goal setting and attainment of coaching outcomes. Grant and Cavanagh found that professional coaches had greater goal-focused coaching skills than nonprofessional coaches, and that these skills were positively related to self-reported emotional intelligence and personal insight. Grant (2013) has stressed the importance of goal-focused skills in coaching and has found that these skills are directly related to goal attainment even when controlling for the coach’s ability to establish a working alliance through trust and warmth.

Clearly, goals are an important aspect of coaching. But should coaches always set goals with their clients? Are goals ever detrimental to coaching? These questions have gone largely unexplored, but there

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is some evidence to suggest that goals may interfere with coaching behaviours in some contexts. Pousa and Mathieu (2010), for example, found that when short-term performance goals were emphasized, sales managers demonstrated more directive behaviours with employees, as opposed to coaching behaviours like asking questions and supporting subordinates in thinking through issues for themselves. In situations such as these, the rigidity of a strict goal-based approach may be less-than-optimal.

To better understand how goals are presented in the coaching literature, we conducted a secondary analysis of Grant's (2010) compilation of abstracts from 635 quality articles and theses on coaching, and found the term "goal" was mentioned in 83 of them. Of these, only two (Hughes, 2003; Stelter, 2009) include any critique of the practice of goal setting. Stelter (2009) suggests "It is not always beneficial to define a goal at the beginning of the coaching session, but to allow narratives to unfold and to reflect on our values and those of others as the basis for our thinking and conduct" (p. 207). The remaining articles assume goal setting as a given—something that coaches do.

We also performed an analysis of books from the contemporary and classic coaching literature and noted a number of themes related to goals. Effective goals are described as client-centred (Whitmore, 2002; Driver, 2011; Starr, 2012), personally meaningful to the coachee (Whitmore, 2002; Wilson, 2007), holistic, meaning the client is considered as a whole person (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002; Wilson, 2007; Bachkirova, 2011; Garvey, 2011), and clear (Wilson, 2007; Szabó & Meier, 2009; Starr, 2012). Some texts stress that clients must take ownership of their goals (Downey, 2003; Wilson, 2007; Driver, 2011; Starr, 2012), and that goals should be challenging (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002; Whitmore, 2002; Wilson, 2007) while falling within the client's sphere of control (Whitmore, 2002; Wilson, 2007; Driver, 2011). Other themes point to the importance of positivity in goal-setting (Whitmore, 2002; Wilson, 2007; Szabó & Meier, 2009), practices of prioritization (Wilson, 2007; Driver, 2011), and goal completion (Wilson, 2007; Szabó & Meier, 2009; Starr, 2012).

While goal setting has been more often explicated than scrutinized by coaching scholars, in recent years a heated debate over goals has sprung up within the wider academic community. What had long been accepted in the management literature as standard goal-setting theory came under fire when a group of scholars (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009) claimed that the (over)prescription of goal setting had "gone wild" within the hegemonic body of applied psychological literature, and that the harmful side effects of setting goals have, to date, gone largely unaddressed (or even ignored). Here we review the standard theory as well as this recent academic argument, so that a more robust understanding of goals can be applied to coaching practice and scholarship. Following this review, we will go on to investigate the prevalence of goal-based practices across demographic categories as a way of gauging current coaches' adherence to the traditional notion of goals as a positive coaching tool.

Locke & Latham's Goal Setting Theory: the Standard Approach

Standard goal setting theory as developed by Locke and Latham (1990, 2002) posits that specific, challenging goals are more effective than vague goals, such as "do your best". This claim is based on research showing that as goals increase in difficulty, performance improves (Locke, 1968, Locke et al., 1981). For example, in one field study, when logging crews were allowed to make mill deliveries only on particular days, they were more productive than when they faced no such restrictions (Latham & Locke, 1975). This is just one of a long list of field and laboratory studies to provide evidence that increasing goal difficulty can enhance performance.

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Locke and Latham (2002) have argued that specific, challenging goals create advantage through four mechanisms. First, they direct attention. A goal helps a person focus on a given task while turning away from the irrelevant. Second, goals energize people and encourage them to exert optimum effort. Third, they support persistence by helping people maintain that effort over time. Finally, goals help people harness all of their existing knowledge and resources, and encourage them to formulate novel solutions where necessary. In other words, goals bring out the best in those who pursue them.

Locke and Latham (2002) also identify conditions that moderate the relationship between challenge and performance. Good performance on a challenging goal requires commitment, meaning the person sees it as important, and feels capable (efficacious) of achieving it. Another important moderator is feedback, which allows people to understand their progress, and exert effort accordingly. Finally, the relationship between challenge and performance is influenced by task complexity. When work is complicated and requires a person to acquire new knowledge, a challenging goal may interfere with, rather than help, performance.

Goal-setting theory has given rise to popular practices like SMART and “stretch goals” (Kerr and Landauer, 2004), which have become gold standards in many organizations, as well as many coaching endeavours. To the contrary, a group of academics recently launched a challenge to these practices, calling into question what they see as the “over prescription” of goal setting.

Goals Gone Wild: Dissenters to the Traditional View

In 2009, Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, and Bazerman declared that goals had “gone wild” in organizations. They highlighted the dark side of Locke and Latham’s goal criteria, providing research examples and case studies in which goals incited workers to engage in unproductive and even unethical behaviour.

In particular, Ordóñez and colleagues point to negative outcomes such as the formation of a *narrowed focus* and *inappropriate time horizon* (Staw & Boettger, 1990; Camerer, Babcock, Loewenstein, & Thaler, 1997; Tenbrunsel, Wade-Benzoni, Messick, and Bazerman, 2000; Cheng, Subramanyam, and Zhang, 2005), *increased risk-taking behaviour* (Larrick, Heath, & Wu, 2009; Galinsky, Mussweiler, & Medvec, 2002), *unethical thoughts and action tendencies* (Jensen, 2003; Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004; Barsky (2007), the *inhibition of learning* (in the case of performance goals) (Cervone, Jiwani, & Wood, 1991; Earley, Connolly, & Ekegren, 1989; Wood, Bandura, & Bailey, 1990), the *inhibition of teaming and cooperation* (Arrow, 1973; Mitchell & Silver, 1990; Wright, George, Farnsworth, & McMahan, 1993), as well as the harmful *externalization of motivation* (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999).

Ordóñez et al. (2009) also suggest that the most direct and demonstrative examples of the dark side of goal setting (Schweitzer et al., 2004; Staw & Boettger, 1990) have been selectively ignored by proponents of the traditional view in their descriptions of the extant literature.

Locke and Latham (2009) responded to Ordóñez et al. (2009) with a stinging critique of their scholarship. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the downsides of goal setting, stating “...we were among the first to alert practitioners to the possible dangers of setting goals (Locke & Latham, 1984). An entire chapter

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of our book was devoted to the following topics: excessive risk taking, increases in stress, feelings of failure, using goals as a ceiling for performance, ignoring non-goal areas, short-range thinking, and dishonesty/cheating” (Locke & Latham, 2009, p. 20). They also call for further research in this area.

While scholars may contest one another’s academic contributions, most can reasonably agree that goal setting can be both beneficial and problematic, depending on the context. As such, the role of goals in coaching should be studied rigorously so that these dangers can be avoided, and goal setting can be implemented in a way that optimizes well-being and effectiveness.

Current Study

The aim of the current study was to explore the use of goals among U.S. and European coaches. Because the professional and academic literature on coaching predominantly treats goals as an unconsidered good idea, we decided to study practitioners’ orientations to goals, thus seeing if the view in the literature was corroborated or refuted by practice. We asked:

- Does formal education in coaching (rather than relying on experience) lead to a greater or lesser use of goals in coaching?
- Does length of experience lead to a greater or lesser use of goals in coaching?
- Does a coach’s goal orientation differ according to other demographic factors, such as geographic location and/or culture?

Critically, our thorough review of the theoretical and empirical literature on this topic indicated that questions of *demographic differences* (e.g. gender, age, geographic location) in goal-based coaching strategies appear to have gone largely unexplored. Thus, the current study seeks to investigate these questions, with the hope of surfacing any relevant differences between/among certain demographic groupings.

Since goals are universally hailed as important in the hegemonic coaching literature, we expected more experienced coaches and those who were educated in depth to demonstrate stronger goal orientation. We held no specific predictions relating to the cultural differences between U.S. and European coaches.

Methods

Goal orientation questionnaire item generation

Due to the paucity of empirical work investigating the role of goal setting in coaching specifically, we constructed an exploratory instrument to be used as a measure of goal orientation.¹ This goal orientation index was composed of 10 Likert-type questions, which participants rated on a 1 to 5 scale. These questions

¹The lack of prior coherent models of goals in coaching or of significant attempts to relate goal setting and goal pursuit by coaches with other relevant fields of goal-related studies (such as goal theory and motivational theory) precluded an approach that relied solely on theory. To deal with this deficit in the extant coaching literature, we approached the issue from both theoretical and practice perspectives. In a workshop focus group setting we first shared with coaches themes from the literature, asked them to relate these to their experience and then to suggest other themes arising from their experience, but not from the literature. The items developed for the questionnaire represent the most common themes that emerged across all coaches.

on goal orientation were designed to sample goal behavior from the first meeting through to final evaluation.

In addition to measuring general attitudes toward goal setting, the questionnaire asked about geographical region and years of coaching experience. It also contained items about the coach's training background: each respondent was asked to indicate whether he or she had learned through experience alone, by attending either a short course (less than 5 weeks), or a long course (more than 5 weeks).

Participants and Procedure

A total of 194 coaches – 45 from Europe and 149 from the United States – participated in the study. The coaches were recruited through the professional networks of the authors. Participants had a range of experience and all were active in their own development, either through attending conferences or through a higher education course. Data were collected in person or online with participants receiving an email inviting them to complete the 5-minute survey.

Results

Questionnaire reliability

The 10 goal-related questions were checked for internal consistency by calculating Cronbach's Alpha using SPSS. Prior to the calculation, two items ("We are surprised by topics that come up during a coaching assignment" and "We have purposeful conversations without setting goals") were reverse-scored, as these indicate less adherence to goals.

The questionnaire was shown to have good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .76. However, the test also showed that Cronbach's Alpha would exceed .8 if the reverse coded item "We are surprised by topics that come up during a coaching assignment" were eliminated. This item was removed, for a final Cronbach alpha of .82 for 9 goal-related survey items. These items were summed to calculate an overall goal orientation score.

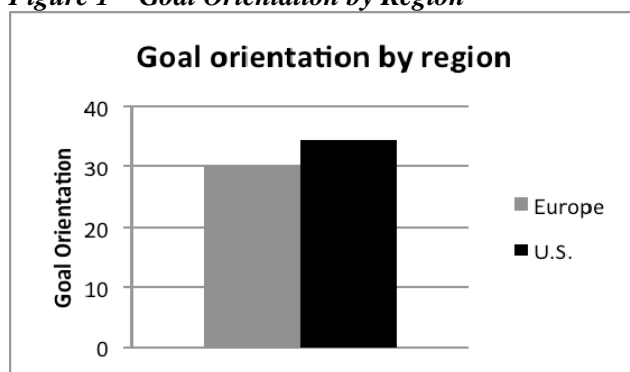
Table 1 Coaching Goal Orientation Questionnaire

Item
I set goals with my coachees at the start of a coaching assignment.
At the start of a coaching assignment we set goals for the whole assignment.
In subsequent coaching sessions we refer back to the goals set at the start.
We determine when to finish a coaching assignment by checking whether goals have been achieved.
The goals help us to decide whether the coaching is appropriately focused.
Goals remain the same throughout the coaching assignment
We set goals for each coaching session.
The goals are central to deciding the effectiveness of the coaching.
We have purposeful conversations without setting goals. (Reverse scored)

Region

Goal Orientation scores for U.S. and European coaches were compared by conducting an independent-samples t-test. U.S. coaches ($M = 34.49$, $SD = 4.95$) were significantly more goal oriented than European coaches ($M = 30.14$, $SD = 5.57$), $t(185) = 4.86$, $p < .001$. This indicates that U.S. are more likely than European coaches to begin coaching by setting goals for the entire assignment, to preserve those goals throughout the engagement, to refer back to established goals in subsequent sessions, and to use them to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the coaching intervention, as well as when to conclude coaching.

Figure 1—Goal Orientation by Region



Experience

The results of a Pearson correlation demonstrated that, for the sample as a whole, years of coaching experience was unrelated to goal orientation [$r = -.038$, $p = .618$]. Examining the data by region, however, revealed a different pattern: while experience was unrelated to goal orientation for U.S. coaches [$r = -.008$, $p = .923$], there was a significant inverse relationship between goal orientation and experience for European coaches [$r = -.432$, $p = .010$]. In other words, the longer a European coach had been practicing, the lower his or her score on goal orientation (Figure 2).

Education

The results also demonstrate that coaching education may influence the strength of coaches' goal orientation (Figure 3). A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of coaching education on goal orientation. Coaches were divided into three groups, depending on whether they had never attended a training course, or had completed either a short course (less than 5 weeks), or a long course (more than 5 weeks). There was a statistically significant difference in goal orientation for the three groups [$F(2, 180) = 4.118$, $p = .018$]. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for coaches who had learned through experience alone ($M = 29.53$, $SD = 6.91$) was significantly lower than the mean score for those who had taken a long course ($M = 34.02$, $SD = 4.85$). Coaches who had taken a short course did not differ significantly from the other two groups ($M = 33.51$, $SD = 5.69$).

Figure 2—Goal Orientation and Experience

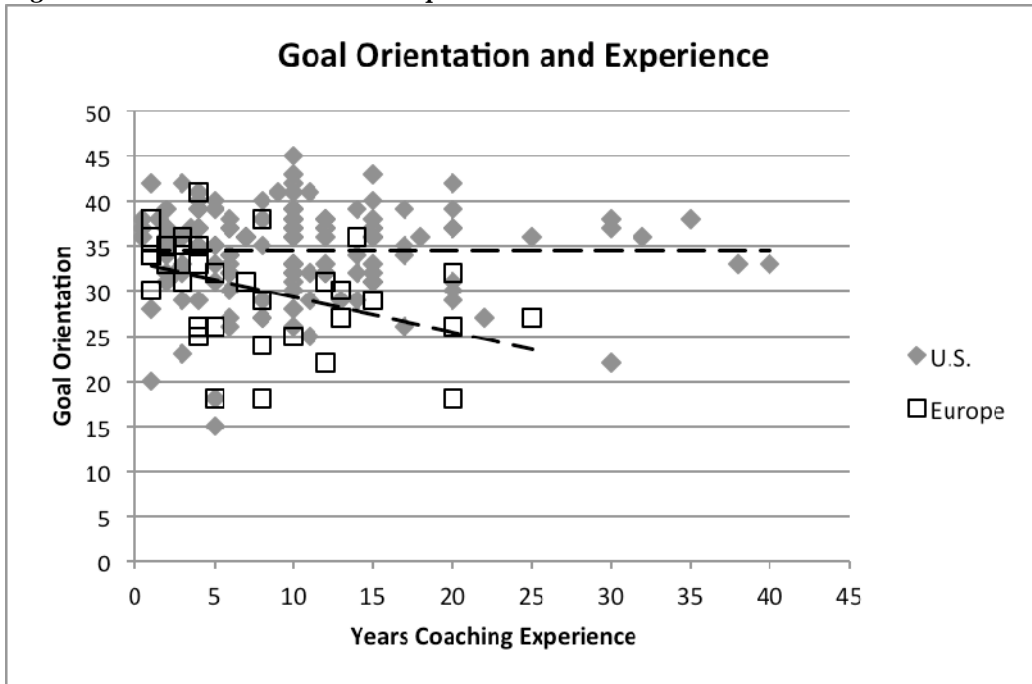
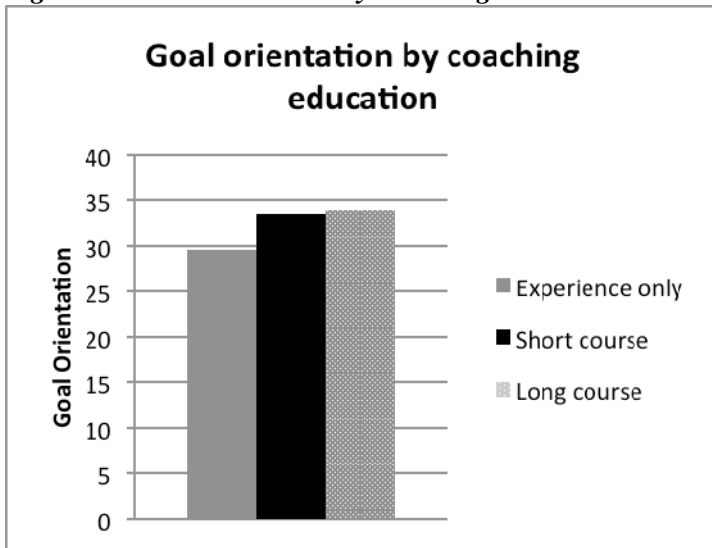


Figure 3—Goal Orientation by Coaching Education



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Discussion

Results suggest that goal orientation is not uniform among coaches, but rather varies along particular demographic dimensions, including region, experience, and training. The hypothesis that more experienced coaches are more goal-oriented was unsupported, and for European coaches experience is related to a decrease in goal orientation. The hypothesis that coaches who have taken longer training programs are more goal oriented was supported.

These findings highlight the importance of geographical and perhaps cultural dimensions of coaching. U.S. coaches are significantly more goal-oriented than their European counterparts, and this difference is likely related to the unique traditions out of which coaching has developed in these regions. Locke and Latham's standard goal-setting theory originated in the United States, as well as Drucker's widely replicated and highly goal-oriented Management by Objectives (MBO; Drucker, 1954). This has undoubtedly contributed to the pervasiveness of goal setting and goal striving in the U.S. coaching field. The field of European coaching, on the other hand, has been more strongly influenced by the founders of psychoanalysis and depth psychology: Freud and Jung, among others (Kets de Vries, 2006). The psychoanalytic tradition is concerned with surfacing elements of the unconscious, rather than pursuing pre-determined targets. These discrete histories may contribute to the divergent approaches to goals in these regions. Further research on the impact of culture on goal orientation is warranted.

Another difference in approaches to coaching may be the willingness of U.S. coaches to embrace sponsorship mentoring, compared with the reluctance of Europeans to set goals for career and income that sponsorship mentoring would imply (Gibb and Megginson, 1993). The researchers found a strong aversion to favoring particular employees through mentoring them by giving them opportunities to shine, or exposure to senior members of the organization. This kind of help was easier to embrace within agreed goals than the more cautious and developmental orientation of most European coaches.

The fact that more experienced European coaches are less goal-oriented than novice practitioners may mean that as European coaches gain experience, they loosen their adherence to goals. It is possible that as a coach continues to work with clients and develops greater competency, he or she can let go of standard models like SMART and GROW, to engage in a more emergent form of coaching. Perhaps there is some aspect of the European coaching field, in particular, that steers coaches in this direction.

It is equally possible that these data represent the opposite: a signalled increase in goal orientation in Europe over time. Perhaps coaches who have been newly trained or introduced to the field are more goal-focused than their predecessors, representing a new wave of coaching professionals who will gradually raise the level of goal orientation in the European field.

The meaning of these data ought to be clarified through longitudinal research, which requires following coaching practitioners over a period. If European coaching practitioners continue to report declines in goal adherence as they gain experience, this would suggest that the European coaching field tempers coaches' goal orientation as they gain expertise. If, however, more novice European coaches retain

current, relatively high, levels of goal orientation as they continue to practice, this would suggest a change in the European coaching field itself.

The findings on coaching education also raise interesting questions about goal orientation. The fact that coaches who have completed a long training program are more focused on goals than those who learn by experience alone suggests that coach education instils a goal orientation. It is likely that some courses provide explicit goal-related frameworks that coaches implement in the field. It is also possible that rather than being influenced by their training, coaches who are already goal-oriented are also more likely to enrol in longer courses. In other words, the finding may reflect an underlying variable, such as a personality trait, that leads people to be both highly goal-oriented and highly trained. Future studies might investigate the relationship between goal orientation and personality dimensions such as neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

Conclusion

The broader research suggests that specific, challenging goals *can* help clients focus and apply themselves, but they may also lead to a host of potentially negative outcomes (such as: inappropriate risk-taking, an unnecessarily narrowed focus, and compromised ethics). This research sheds light on patterns in the practice of goal setting and management in coaching. It points to potentially important differences among coaching practitioners and raises questions for future research. What are the similarities and differences between U.S. and European coaches' attitudes toward goals in coaching? Why does goal orientation decline for more experienced European, but not U.S. coaches? Is goal orientation a cause or effect of greater coach education?

Coaching has been likened to the "wild west" (Sherman & Freas, 2004). The last thing it needs is for goals to "*go wild*". We encourage coaching scholars to continue conducting research in this area, so that goal setting can be well-understood and appropriately practiced around the world.

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