



Toronto District School Board

**RESEARCH SERIES ON SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS
AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
*Goal Setting***

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TLE: Research Series on School Effectiveness and School Improvement: *Goal Setting*

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***What you get by achieving your goals is
not as important as what you become by
achieving your goals.***

Henry David Thoreau (King's College London, 2016, p. 1).

BACKGROUND

The word goal has been defined as “the object to which effort or ambition is directed; the destination of a journey . . . An end or result towards which behaviour is consciously or unconsciously directed” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010, p. 517). To set a goal is to plan for the future, to realize a certain state of being; it involves “. . . conscious behavioural intention that channel our energies or motivation to help us attain future objectives” (Muchinsky, 2000, p. 350). In addition, goal setting serves as a guide and inspires effort towards improvement.

Within education, goal setting is a common practice. Many educational organizations and the people within those bodies frequently set goals (targets) to focus attention. For example, concentrating teachers’ attention on professional development in the area of classroom management may change and/or improve teaching practices to some extent in schools and classrooms. Overall, the aim of educational goal setting for teachers is frequently to reflect on professional practice to improve, change, and look forward. Goal setting often leads to improvement and sustains performance (DuBrin, 2012). That is why it can be found at all levels of an education system and is not limited to the classroom, teachers, or administrators. As an organization, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (2016) decided:

One of the goals for the *TDSB’s Vision for Learning* was to provide educators with... required information and with resources to collaborate and share experiences and successes in applying deep learning in the classroom. The TDSB is also working to modernize its network and infrastructure environment to help ensure stable and seamless access to digital learning resources when required. (p. 13)

However, the choice of a target or goal can be problematic if it is guided more by current events, such as violence in the workplace, or an outcome (e.g., low mathematics scores/achievement).

Goals should be aligned with the desire or passion of an educator, and “it is virtually axiomatic that if there is

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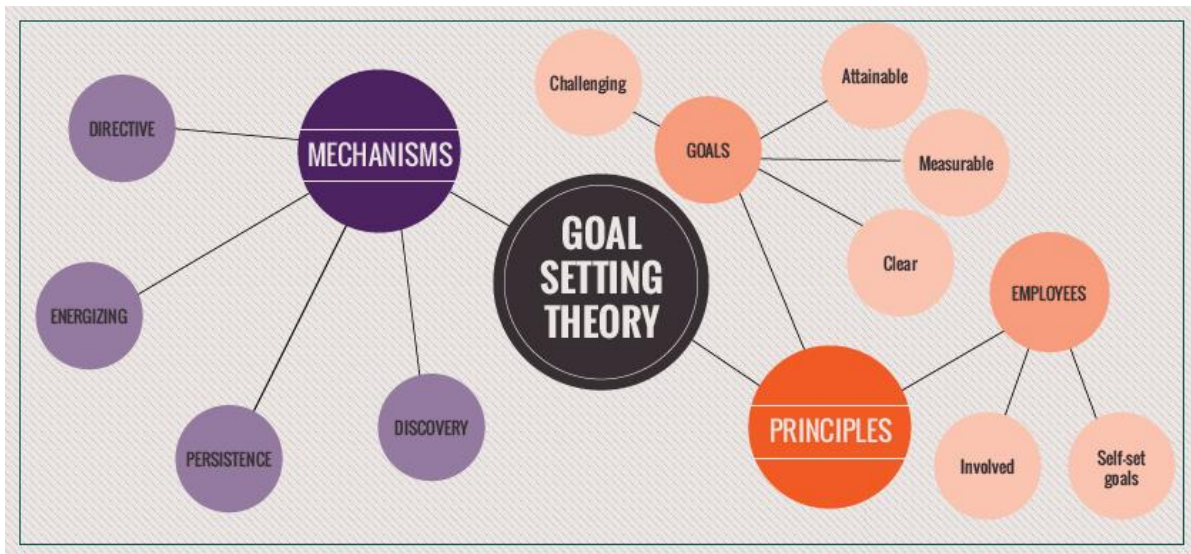
no commitment to goals, then goal setting does not work” (Lock, Latham, & Erez, 1988, p. 23). Committing to goals requires shared observation, attention to goal setting

theory, and comprehensive levels of collaboration between people. Embracing these requirements has caused the TDSB to ask all stakeholders to “. . . find new ways to improve collaboration between educators to help ensure we have an ongoing, productive dialogue on the best ways to improve the learning environment for our students and set the right achievement goal” (TDSB, 2016, p. 13). New ways continue to safeguard *equity* which is understood as “a condition or state of affair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all students, families and staff regardless of social and cultural backgrounds, social identities, or personal life circumstances” (Council of Directors of Education, 2014, p. 16).

Goal Setting in School Improvement

Caputo and Rastelli (2014) found the most important factor for having effective improvement planning strategies that promoted student achievement was the ability of the school to “[take into] account the educational context and, above all, detecting specific and detailed improvement goals” (p. 94). Schools that were able to design and communicate clear, explicit goals showed greater improvement in student achievement. Similarly, Fernandez (2011) in Nevada (USA) found the quality of a school’s School Improvement Plan (SIP) was significantly positively correlated with student achievement above and beyond other characteristics of the school such as socio-economic level. His results also revealed that schools whose SIPs contained goals set in a specific time frame and who frequently monitored school performance had the highest levels of improvement in math and literacy. In Ontario, the Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119 “. . . outlines eight areas of focus to guide board EIE policy implementation as part of school and board improvement planning, board policy review cycles, and the board’s multi-year strategic plan to support student achievement and well-being” (Council of Directors of Education, 2014, p. 10).

Figure 1: Goal Setting Theory



Source: Brudan (2010)

Goal Setting Theory

Goal setting theory identifies two significant characteristics of goals. First, there is goal *difficulty* and second, goal *specificity*. Locke and Latham (2002) have labeled these elements the *core* of a goal. It may seem obvious to some, but being specific in goal setting improves goal comprehension, focus, and usually leads to goal achievement. Consider the goal of raising *math scores* in a grade six class, which is very much a current concern. This is a worthwhile aim, however, the goal is somewhat broad and unspecific and it could be too difficult for some teachers and students to achieve at this general level. A better goal would be to raise the math scores in a grade six geometry unit by 4% from the class pretest using modeling, practice, and authentic math tasks. While 4% is still a challenging goal, it is specific, clear, and addresses improvement (Locke & Latham, 2002).

As Newman (2012) points out, “goal setting is about setting priorities and zeroing in on teaching and learning priorities” (p. 13). In order to ensure goals can be easily understood one must “begin with

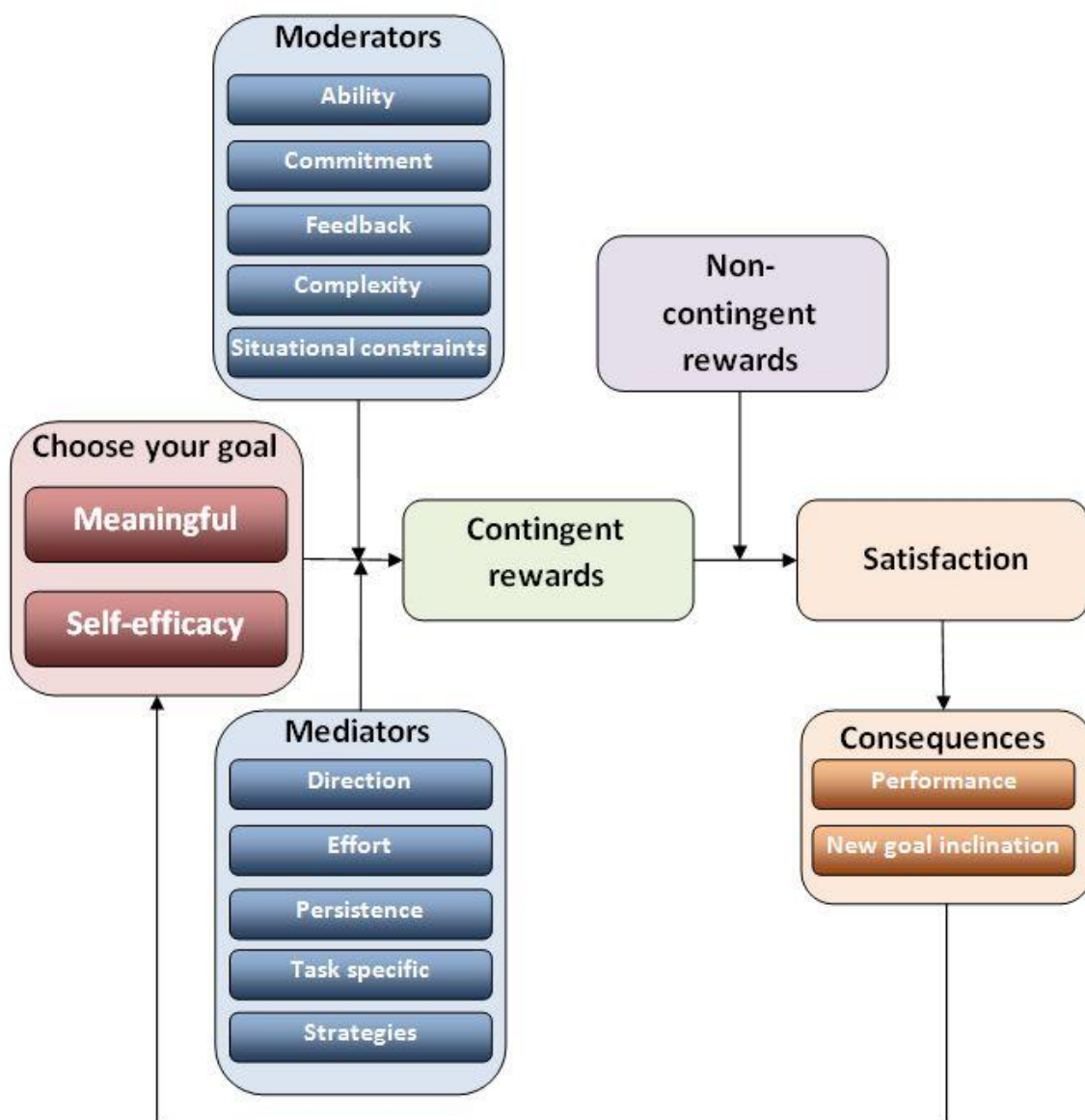
Goal setting theory suggests that setting clear, specific goals that are challenging but achievable is the best way to ensure commitment to and ultimately achievement of a goal.

clear statements of the intended learning - clear and understandable to everyone, including students” (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009, p. 14). Recall that the nature of how goals are decided upon or set is just as critical as the goal (target) itself (Terpstra & Rozell 1994). We set goals in education for a simple reason – “to know what we are

trying to achieve and to be explicitly clear about our path toward success” (Newman, 2012, p. 16).

Contemporary acknowledgment of these goal-setting realities leads to the “use of new learning partnerships between students and teachers, increased adoption of deep learning tasks, and use of digital learning tools and resources” (TDSB, 2016, p. 10). As a result, “students are becoming actively engaged in their education and in the learning process” (TDSB, 2016, p. 10).

Figure 2: Goal Setting Psychology of Locke and Latham



Source: Renando (2016)

As noted in Figure 2, goal setting can be understood as a theory interwoven with moderators, mediators, and motivation (Locke, 1968; Maslow, 1970; Herzberg, 2009) which drive behaviour (action) in specific situations towards consequences and a state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Lunenburg (2011) claims, “a goal is defined simply as what the individual is consciously trying to do” (p. 2). Goals and targets are cerebral (psychological) and can dictate action(s); however, they must also be attainable. A person must feel that they are capable of achieving the goal (self-efficacy) because attainable goals are more likely to be accepted while providing motivation. Accepting the goal and then committing to that goal involves “adherence to the goal, and resistance to changing the goal at a later point in time” (Tubbs, 1993, p. 96).

Equity

Goal setting and acceptance relates to the possibility (capacity) of whether a person can realistically achieve such a goal within the specific time frame and to the extent desired. This is when **equity** must be considered and where equitable treatment of students means “ . . . removing discriminatory barriers to teaching and learning, . . . ensuring proportionate levels of support to those who need it the most, in order to improve student achievement and well-being . . . to close achievement gaps” (Council of Directors of Education, 2014, p. 16). Some goals can become barriers if the needs, beliefs, and desires of each person are not considered during goal development. Cambridge Public Schools (2015) suggest equity, “in education can be defined as the policies, practices, programs, personnel, and resources that are required to eliminate

Some goals can become barriers if the needs, beliefs, and desires of each person are not considered during goal development.

barriers to educational opportunity and achievement for all students” (p. 2). Educators understand and recognize that some students lack resources and/or abilities, “and it is a school’s task to provide what is necessary to get each child to a pre-defined, universal, and high-level of academic success” (p. 2). In Ontario there remains a specific mandate “to use an EIE rubric to support deeper implementation of the EIE policy” (Council of Directors of Education, 2016, p. 9). Steps to guide users of the EIE rubric, with its 18 outcomes, guide educators to:

- ... determine how they relate to the goals of achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being and enhancing public confidence;

- Apply the indicators on the rubric to current implementation of the policy using identified evidence. This is to determine what activities and procedures are in place, partially in place, or not in place in the system;

Use the indicators on the rubric as an implementation check-list for the purpose of (i) supporting ongoing planning, (ii) continuous improvement, and (iii) preparing an annual progress report;

Promote and facilitate use of the rubric by staff as a reference document for planning and assessment of activities in equity and inclusive education; and/or

Serve as an ongoing system advisory team or committee on the implementation of the EIE policy within a culture of continuous improvement. (Council of Directors of Education, 2016, p. 9)

Applying the EIE rubric and observing goal setting theory can be a perplexing duality and “equity work is challenging when not all stakeholders agree with problem definitions, nomenclature, concepts, scope of work, and the empirical research behind equity practice” (Cambridge Public Schools, 2015, p. 6). Defining terms and practices remain a priority and the “district administration would benefit from articulating its vision and then a plan for equity so the community at large can better understand the challenges it is trying to solve and solutions it believes might work” (Cambridge Public Schools, 2015, p. 6). Still, it is these important factors that determine whether or not goals are successfully achieved.

Goal setting challenges communication skills, knowledge of self, and awareness of the learning landscape because goals are negotiated individually and/or with others. Setting unrealistic goals that are beyond plausibility within improbable time frames may only cause demoralization and

disengagement via failure or realization of less than adequate outcomes.

Observing goal setting theory and practices “ . . . helps to stimulate and motivate students, as they have greater control of their learning, are able to

connect to and explore the real world [authenticity] during the learning process, and can set personal learning goals based on aspirations” (TDSB, 2016, p. 10). Educators must focus on the goal setting steps and established theory to ensure positive outcomes; however, the process needs to *equitable* by “responding to the individual needs of each student and providing the conditions and interventions needed to help him or her succeed” (Council of Directors of Education, 2014, p. 7).

Setting unrealistic goals that are beyond plausibility within improbable time frames may only cause demoralization and disengagement via failure or realization of less than adequate outcomes.

Equity is crucial to goal achievement, as individual needs and desires must be considered in order to develop appropriate targets that people feel capable of achieving.

Beliefs and Values

No matter the goal, values, beliefs, and perceptions permeate the process.

Beliefs and values are “believed to be fundamental components ingrained in a person’s make up and are determinants of attitudes and behavior” (Coombs-Richardson & Tolson, 2005, p. 266). Indeed, “a singular human value can be associated with how one acts, thinks or responds, as the value upon which the decision is made surfaces” (Ryan, Schruder, & Robinson, 2013, p. 3). The enduring beliefs or values that the educational institution communicates are conveyed within early, formative years of schooling. As

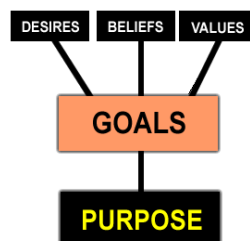
some students make the transition to teaching, these values are learned as

In terms of education, the goal must align with the values and enduring beliefs of the people and the institution in order for change to happen.

a student is carried forward. Therefore, it is clear that education is not an unbiased or neutral enterprise (Parkay, Hardcastle Stanford, Vaillancourt, Stephens, & Harris, 2012). Goal development is biased and influenced by values and goal setting therefore is inherently subjective, as certain values will take precedence over others. People can set goals too high or too low; they may be too broad or too narrow, or rejected by the goal setter covertly. In order to ensure achievement of people’s personal and communal goals “one’s beliefs (including self-efficacy) must support the change” (Hannula, 2006, p. 170). In terms of education, the goal must align with the values and enduring beliefs of the people and the institution in order for change to happen. This is the only way to attain the motivation necessary to achieve the goal. In schools, the task is multilayered, as all educators need to “. . . focus on building goals for student achievement, equity and well-being, [since] it is important to support deep learning practices and rich technology integration in the classroom and to continuously work towards removing obstacles to student learning” (TDSB, 2016, p. 14).

Goal setting in education must align with the values, beliefs, and mission of the people and institution in order to ensure commitment and achievement of goals.

Figure 3: Factors that Influence Goal Setting



Source: Newman (2012)

Goal Setting Models

A popular model for designing effective goals is the SMART framework (Doran, 1981). This suggests that goals must be specific rather than broad, must be designed with a method to measure and track progress, must be challenging but attainable and realistic, and must be constructed within a specific time-frame rather than open-ended.

However, Day and Tosey (2011) claim the use of SMART targets as detailed in Figure 4 can be challenging because they may “be employed in an instrumental manner, and divorced from [people’s] active engagement and reflection on their practice” (p. 517). Day and Tosey (2011) propose the idea of the “well-formed outcome” from neuro-linguistic programming as an alternative model for conceptualizing how to plan and achieve goals. The term outcome “shifts the emphasis from looking to the future for something one wishes to achieve to the outcome being the unfolding of an action plan” (Day & Tosey, 2011, p. 522). Day and Tosey (2011) propose the mnemonic *POWER* which better represents the elements of goal setting that are crucial to successful achievement of a goal where,

- **P** stands for a positive statement (gaining something rather than moving away from something)
- **O** stands for using your own actions to achieve the goal rather than depending on others
- **W** stands for assessing what specifically will be required to achieve the goal including time and other resources
- **E** stands for evidence of progress towards and achievement of the goal
- **R** stands for relationship (the effect moving towards the goal has on relationships with others that may result in the need to problem-solve or adjust actions)

Day and Tosey (2011) claim the *POWER* framework allows for “the exploration of potential obstacles [... and the exploration of] feelings” (p. 522) towards a target or goal that the SMART framework often does not capture. Consider the goal of improving a school and *POWER* appears to be more useful for schools.

The term outcome “shifts the emphasis from looking to the future for something one wishes to achieve to the outcome being the unfolding of an action plan” (Day & Tosey, 2011, p. 522).

Figure 4: SMART Goal Setting



Source: Day & Tosey (2011)

Goal Setting Tools

Setting suitable goals and monitoring progress towards these targets can be an effective way to improve student achievement. Articulating appropriate goals allows for the development of effective strategies and key actions that can lead to the achievement of goals. Researchers at the Education Review Office (2015) in New Zealand found that schools were most successful at meeting or exceeding their targets when they combined two key processes: developing clear, challenging, and achievable goals and promoting team processes to advance progress towards achieving these goals, such as collectively deciding on key actions for reaching specific targets.

Figure 5: Successful Goal Setting Processes

Goal setting in successful schools created:



2. Team processes for accelerating progress



Source: New Zealand Education Review Office (2015)

Holmberg (2014) suggests that “effective leaders . . . need to develop a vision that can provide [a] distant goal together with specific challenging goals to help implement the vision” (p. 16). If targets are too high it “may ultimately demoralize key actors and stakeholders” (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 4) rendering the end goal unobtainable, so “*starting slow* and leaving room for goals to be adjusted upward later is important” (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 4). However, if goals are not challenging enough stakeholders may not be fully motivated to achieve results. Aligning goals with a Board or District’s calendar year can allow for the development of balance between challenging but obtainable targets because it provides a way to break them down into smaller units so that progress can be more easily tracked and achieved (Hanover Research, 2014).

Much of the literature on best practices for goal setting supports these ideas. Grant and Stronge (2013) suggest goal setting is effective when “goals are proximal rather than distal . . . specific . . . and challenging” (p. 7). One way to ensure targets are appropriate and stakeholders are invested (motivated) is to ensure that they have significant input into the development of strategies and goals. Robinson and Timperely (2007) found that co-construction of goals between teachers and external professionals led to the highest impact on student achievement, “ . . . probably because a co-constructed process gives leaders the opportunity to check the understanding and confidence of staff and to adjust external expectations in the light of internal realities” (p. 251).

Another way to ensure that stakeholders are motivated to achieve school improvement goals is to make sure that they have the capacity, tools, and resources to achieve them. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) states it is crucial to ensure people “either [...] believe their current resources are sufficient [...] to meet the goal] or they are confident they will be given the additional expertise and support they need” (p. 4). The Council of Directors of Education (2016) acknowledges the Ontario Education Act which “ . . . requires boards to have an [Equity and Inclusive Education] EIE policy in place. There should be clear alignment between the board’s multi-year strategic plan and its EIE policy to support integration and the embedding of EIE principles across school and board operations and learning environments” (p. 11). This EIE policy provides support, direction, and communication, which is critical in education. Holmberg (2014) confirms this in his findings: goals can sometimes be “specific in what they want to achieve; however, they lack measurability and descriptions of how to achieve them. This creates broad, and often abstract, goals that are at risk of remaining empty promises” (p. 14). Holmberg (2014) also found that goals were more attainable when they were “ . . . implemented within a supportive framework that provided teachers with feedback,

direction, monitoring and communication” (p. 16). To this end, coaching and feedback can play a vital role in influencing goal commitment and achievement (Erez, 1995).

Another way to ensure that stakeholders are motivated to achieve school improvement goals is to make sure that they have the capacity, tools, and resources to achieve them.

Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, and Bazerman (2009) believe that even if performance goals are laid out they may be too narrow, vague, ill-timed, unrealistic, beyond the reach of the goal setter(s) or may even set up conflict with others, which could lead to disengagement and a failure to reach goals (negative consequences) (Latham & Locke, 2002). To avoid failure, goals need to be operationalized - connected to key actions and strategies by being made public, given a time frame, a description of how they will be accomplished and a

means to be monitored and evaluated (Rader, 2005). Tying goals to

Goals were more successful when they were implemented within a supportive framework that provided teachers “with feedback, direction, monitoring and communication” (Holmberg, 2014, p. 16).

strategies for monitoring and evaluation allows one to adjust targets or actions accordingly to ensure success. For example, as “they carry out the process of inquiry, students are expected to review, analyze, and evaluate their learning progress, working together with their teachers to adjust strategies and goals as required” (TDSB, 2016, p. 11). Teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders also support student goal setting and achievement activities both in classrooms and the larger landscape of schools and the educational system.

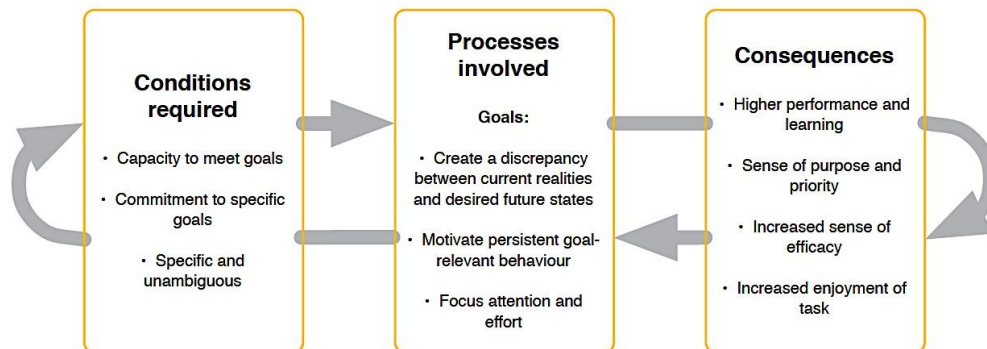
In summary, there are many important factors that determine whether or not goal setting will be successful:

1. Goals must be specific and clearly communicated to stakeholders
2. Goals must be challenging yet obtainable
3. Long-term targets should be broken down into shorter-term objectives to provide a manageable time-frame
4. Teachers and other stakeholders should be involved in the creation of goals, strategies, and key actions to ensure they are appropriate, attainable and to increase motivation to achieve them
5. Goals should be tied to the current capacity of the system and be linked with strategies/actions that provide people with the resources and tools necessary to successfully achieve them

6. Articulation of goals needs to include objective and detailed steps for how to track progress towards goals and evaluation of outcomes (including coaching and feedback on performance)

Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) found the development of appropriate goals often leads to successful achievement of goals, which can then result in the creation of a long-lasting positive feedback loop.

Figure 6: How Effective Goal Setting Works



Source: Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009)

In summary, many researchers claim that the consequences of successfully achieving goals leads to the desire to improve further, the creation of new goals, motivation, and commitment to recursively succeed again.

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