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The Impact of Commitment, Accountability, and Written Goals on Goal Achievement

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Goals Research Summary

Perhaps you have heard of the Yale (or Harvard Business School) study of goals in which only 3% of the graduating class had specific written goals for their futures. Twenty years later that 3% was found to be earning an astounding 10 times that of the group that had no clear goals. Well, it turns out that this “study” is merely an “urban myth,” as extensive reviews of the research literature by me and by Steven Kraus (a social psychologist from Harvard) as well as investigative reporting by *Fast Company* magazine revealed that no such study had ever been done!

However, the widespread mention of this non-existent study in business circles as well as the need for research into the techniques used by business coaches provided impetus for my current research, which was focused on how goal achievement is influenced by writing goals, committing to goal-directed actions and being accountable for those actions.

Participants:

A total of 267 participants were recruited from businesses, organizations, and business networking groups. However, only 149 participants completed the study. The final participants ranged in age from 23 to 72, with 37 males and 112 females. Participants came from the United States, Belgium, England, India, Australia and Japan and included a variety of entrepreneurs, educators, healthcare professionals, artists, attorneys, bankers, marketers, human services providers, managers, vice presidents, directors of non-profits, etc.

Research Design:

Participants were randomly assigned to one of 5 conditions (groups): Group 1- Unwritten Goal; Group 2- Written Goal; Group 3- Written Goal & Action Commitments; Group 4- Written Goal, Action Commitments to a Friend; Group 5- Written Goal, Action Commitments & Progress Reports to a Friend.

- Participants in **Group 1** were simply asked to **think about their goals** (what they wanted to accomplish over the next 4 weeks) and then asked to rate that goal on the following dimensions: Difficulty, Importance, the extent to which they had the Skills & Resources to accomplish the goal, their Commitment and Motivation to the goal, whether or not they had Pursued this goal before and if so their Prior Success.
- Participants in **Groups 2-5** were asked to **write (type into the online survey) their goals** and then to rate their goals on the same dimensions.
- **Group 3** was also asked to formulate **action commitments**.
- **Group 4** was asked to **formulate action commitments and send their goals and action commitments to a supportive friend**.
- **Group 5** was asked to formulate **action commitments and send their goals, action commitments and weekly progress reports to a supportive friend**.

Participants in this group were also sent weekly reminders to email quick progress reports to their friend.

At the end of 4 weeks participants were asked to rate their progress and the degree to which they had accomplished their goals

Results

1. **Types of goals:** Participants pursued a variety of goals including (in order of frequency reported) completing a project, increasing income, increasing productivity, getting organized, enhancing performance/achievement, enhancing life balance, reducing work anxiety and learning a new skill. Examples of “completing a project” included writing a chapter of a book, updating a website, listing and selling a house, completing a strategic plan, securing a contract, hiring employees and preventing a hostile take-over.
2. **Goal Achievement:** Group 5 achieved significantly more than all the other groups; Group 4 achieved significantly more than Groups 3 and 1; Group 2 achieved significantly more than Group 1.



3. **Differences between all writing groups and the non-writing group:** Although the previous analysis revealed that Group 2 (written goals) achieved significantly more than Group 1 (unwritten goals), additional analysis were performed to determine whether there were also differences between the group that had not written their goals (Group 1) and all groups that had written their goals (Groups 2-5).

This analysis revealed that the mean achievement score for Groups 2-5 combined was significantly higher than Group 1.



Conclusions:

1. **The positive effect of accountability was supported:** those who sent weekly progress reports to their friend accomplished significantly more than those who had unwritten goals, wrote their goals, formulated action commitments or sent those action commitments to a friend.
2. **There was support for the role of public commitment:** those who sent their commitments to a friend accomplished significantly more than those who wrote action commitments or did not write their goals.
3. **The positive effect of written goals was supported:** Those who wrote their goals accomplished significantly more than those who did not write their goals.

With the proliferation of business and personal coaching and the often anecdotal reports of coaching success it is important that this growing profession be founded on sound scientific research.

- **This study provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of three coaching tools: accountability, commitment and writing down one's goals.**
- **There now is a study demonstrating that writing one's goal enhances goal achievement. However, it was not done at Harvard or Yale, but at Dominican University.**