



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0405S  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
NOVEMBER 27, 2018

## **ARTICLE** **MOTIVATING PEOPLE**

# Why You Should Stop Setting Easy Goals

*by Amitava Chattopadhyay, Antonios Stamatogiannakis  
and Dipankar Chakravarti*

MOTIVATING PEOPLE

# Why You Should Stop Setting Easy Goals

by Amitava Chattopadhyay, Antonios Stamatogiannakis and Dipankar Chakravarti  
NOVEMBER 27, 2018



MICROZOA/GETTY IMAGES

When setting team goals, many managers feel that they must maintain a tricky balance between setting targets high enough to achieve impressive results and setting them low enough to keep the troops happy. But the assumption that employees are more likely to welcome lower goals doesn't stand up to scrutiny. In fact, our research indicates that in some situations people perceive higher goals as easier to attain than lower ones — and even when that's not the case, they still can find those more challenging goals more appealing.

In a series of studies we describe in our [latest paper](#), we tested how people perceive goals by asking participants on Amazon’s crowdsourcing marketplace, known as [Mechanical Turk](#), to rate the difficulty and appeal of targets set at various levels and across spheres from sports performance and GPA to weight loss and personal savings. We asked about both “status quo” goals, in which the target remained set at a baseline level similar to recent performance, and “improvement goals” in which the target was set higher than the baseline by varying degrees.

### **What makes a goal seem hard to achieve?**

In our first study, we recruited a couple of hundred participants on Mechanical Turk and split them into five groups. We showed one group just status quo goals — for example, achieving the same GPA as the previous semester. We showed the other four groups improvement goals that reflected either small, moderate, large or very large gains over the current baseline.

For the various improvement goals, as you would expect, our subjects perceived higher targets as more difficult to achieve and lower targets as less difficult (4.01 versus 2.82 on a scale of difficulty from 1 to 7). But, surprisingly, participants rated the status quo goal as *more difficult* (3.23) than the small-increase goal — in fact, just a bit less than a moderate one (3.49).

To learn why, in our second study, we asked participants to give reasons for their ratings of modest improvement and status quo goals. The group that evaluated the modest goals tended to write about the *gap* between the status quo and the goal and *how small* it was, which led to them to be optimistic about their success. Meanwhile, the group that evaluated the maintenance goals listed more *reasons for failure based on context* and was more pessimistic.

From this and a subsequent study, we concluded that when people are given a status quo goal, they’re more sensitive to the context for achieving it than when they’re given an improvement goal — and that’s all the more true if the context is already unfavorable. Think about it this way: When we’re judging the difficulty of a goal, the first thing our brains see is the size of the gap that separates the goal from the baseline. The bigger the gap, the more difficult the goal, as logic would suggest. Only later do we begin to consider the context in which we’ll need to achieve that goal. But in the absence of any gap to evaluate — as with a status quo goal — our minds immediately start thinking about that context. Our all-too-human negativity bias then kicks in and our brains start generating reasons why we might fail. Thus setting a steady baseline goal just to make your people more confident is actually likely to do just the opposite.

### **Harder goals mean more satisfaction**

In the studies we’ve described so far, participants rated the goals we gave them one at a time. The results were different, though, when we asked them to rate status quo and modest improvement goals in tandem.

There the pattern broke: when participants evaluated these goals together, they *did* judge the modest improvement goal as more difficult than the status quo goal (3.02 vs 2.43). Generalizing from our

findings in the earlier study, we deduce that the participants took their cue from the gaps between the goal and the baseline, and logically concluded that it was easier to maintain the status quo than to increase results.

But in the same study, when we asked participants which of the two goals they would choose to pursue, they *again* chose modest improvement targets over status quo targets. This finding held across all kinds of spheres — whether about achieving a higher GPA, exercising more, completing more tasks, saving more, or working more hours. Despite the fact that they knew these goals were harder, participants anticipated greater satisfaction from achieving modest positive changes as opposed to maintaining the status quo.

As a manager, these findings should encourage you to set your team at least modest improvement goals rather than status quo goals — *especially* in tough contexts such as a bearish economy, an all-consuming merger, or with a key contract up in the air. Even if the goal is hard to achieve, your team is likely to see the benefits — and to be motivated to reach a target that makes them proud.

---

**Amitava** Chattopadhyay is the GlaxoSmithKline Chaired Professor of Corporate Innovation at INSEAD. He is co-author of *The New Emerging Market Multinationals: Four Strategies for Disrupting Markets and Building Brands*. You can follow him on Twitter [@AmitavaChats](#).

---

**Antonios Stamatogiannakis** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the IE Business School.

---

**Dipankar Chakravarti** is the Sonny Merryman Inc. Professor in Business at the Pamplin College of Business of Virginia Tech.

---