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the Learning as Leadership Report

Performance Vs. Learning Goals

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In any given situation, we have goals. Typically, we do not clarify what our goals are, and they guide us unconsciously. Conscious or not, however, goals do guide our behavior at any given time. There are many ways to categorize goals; but one particularly helpful framework is the distinction between performance goals and learning goals.

Take any situation relevant for you: preparing for and taking an exam, participating in a meeting, having a discussion with a relative or accomplishing an assignment from your boss. You may approach the situation with either a performance goal or a learning goal in mind. In the Learning as Leadership seminars, we come to an emotional and intellectual understanding that Performance Goals will tend to bring you into a space of "being at the mercy,"* whereas Learning Goals will tend to re-center you into a space of "being at the source."* Let us look at how current research supports the value of this distinction.

Definitions: Performance Vs. Learning Goals

Performance Goals are, as their name suggests, centered on one's performance in a domain. Success or failure in achieving the goal depends on the outcome (getting an A on the test, having your boss praise your work, etc.).

Learning Goals, on the other hand, are aimed at improving oneself, and at times, even discovering entirely new areas or issues one needs to work on.

Immediate Conclusion: Failure is a Threat

According to psychologist Carol Dweck, of Columbia University, performance goals are about trying to ensure that one is judged (by the self and others) as competent, or avoiding being judged as incompetent. By extension, they inherently aim at impressing others.

Guided by that goal, one will act accordingly: by playing it safe, doing only tasks that are well within one's current ability, avoiding mistakes at all cost. If some type of failure does occur, one's immediate instinct is to find external reasons for poor performance, to protect one's own self-image of being competent.

Hundreds of psychology experiments have shown that people are typically eager to attribute their successes to their high level of ability, but they tend to blame failure on other people, the circumstances, lack of effort, or anything that avoids implication that the failure reflects a lack of ability. People are more likely to believe a test is invalid or inaccurate when they fail than when they succeed (Frey, 1978; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Shrauger, 1975) (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985).

Obviously, this limits our ability to properly analyze failure and we stay limited to partial explanations that others will often perceive as "excuses" – and rightly so. Why do we use these excuses? To protect the fundamental weaknesses we are not willing to admit.

From our childhood, our ego has concluded it is okay for us to have weaknesses in certain areas (ex: laziness), whereas having weaknesses in other places (ex: lack of intelligence) would mean we are worthless, or not as great as we believe we are. These places differ for each one of us, depending on our education and experiences. Each one of us, however, will protect those weaknesses at all costs.

Most of our "excuses" shift the burden on to others or some outside circumstance (bad luck, the evolution of the market, they dislike me, etc). These reasons allow us to escape any sort of responsibility. In certain instances, however, we are willing to accept responsibility for failure, so long as it does not reflect a lack in one of the abilities that our ego requires us to be good at. We will admit one of the "acceptable" weaknesses, such as "I didn't give it my best effort" (I was lazy), but never will we admit one of our fundamental weaknesses, such as "I did my best, but still did not get the results I wanted" (I was not intelligent enough). We can consequently accept responsibility and still keep face.

Learning goals reflect one's desire to improve, to "grow," and in some ways to break new ground for oneself. In essence, this type of goal will induce a different starting point than performance goals. Acknowledging that one is imperfect, recognizing areas in which one could be doing better, and risking failure are not a threat to the self, or a sign of failing at the goal

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* Concepts from the Learning as Leadership Methodology





anymore, but are actually instead a source of raw material and information for the central goal: learning. Each setback and difficulty allows us to clarify our areas for improvement, skills we need to expand, and in turn adds additional fuel and motivation for the learning goal. The entire frame of reference is different.

Extended Conclusion: When performance goals are detrimental to performance

As explained previously, studies show that we construct consistent “excuses” about ourselves for different types of failures, concluding the same type of reasons for failure and overlooking the same type of “threatening” reasons. This protects the places our ego cannot accept failure, consequently causing us to develop well-entrenched blind spots.

“The same blind spots and real causes of past failure that people avoid examining, may cause failure again.”

As a result, not only do people repeatedly fail to address the areas in which they need improvement, but moreover, the same blind spots and real causes of past failure that people avoid

examining, may cause failure again (and once again the same “excuses” will be used). Performance goals thus create zones in which we avoid learning and foster personal blind spots that jeopardize our own ability to perform.

Systemic Consequences: “He who only watches the bottom line, watches it shrink”

When we focus on how well we perform, we are focused on the outcome of our actions and ignore the process that leads us there. Performance goals focus attention on the end result and keep reminding us of our fears of failing and not measuring up to expectations (either those we set for ourselves or those we believe others have for us). Whenever we don’t obtain expected outcomes, we become more afraid of not measuring up, and fall into a downward cycle. Anything challenging (i.e. that we don’t already know how to do perfectly) will raise concerns of “failure,” and will make it painful to encounter difficulty or to make mistakes.

Research by Carol Dweck and Elaine Elliot (Elliott & Dweck, 1988) showed that students who were given a performance goal did fine when their task was easy and they were succeeding, but as soon as the task became difficult their efforts became disorganized, their problem-solving deteriorated, and they concluded that they simply didn’t have the ability to do the task.

“[With learning goals,] failures are not a threat to the self anymore, but a source of raw material and information for the central goal: learning.”

Students who were given a learning goal, on the other hand, did not worry about their ability even when the task was very difficult for them, they remained focused on the task, and they maintained their effective problem-solving strategies.

By connecting us with the need to “be better than” and the fear of “not measuring up,” performance goals limit our ability to act, learn and ultimately, to perform.

Alternative Approach: “The Goal is in the Path”

Learning Goals are inspiring, by nature, because they should not trigger fears. There is no way to fail at a learning goal because even failure to meet expected milestones to the goal provides an opportunity to learn, and therefore moves us towards our learning goal. In that context, results are not intended to depreciate or raise our self-esteem - they are not a statement of worth and value - but rather they are to be used as a tool to evaluate our progress towards our learning goals and give us specific leads to improve. They are, therefore, likely to release our creativity and motivation, and in the end help results!

In a classroom setting, Farrell and Dweck (1985) measured whether students had learning or performance goals. All the students then learned a new unit of science, and learned how to solve new kinds of problems. Then, all the students were given a novel problem set that they had not received instruction on, but that used the same principles they had just learned (novel problems). Students with learning and performance goals had equal ability initially (before attempting the novel problems). But students with the learning goal did more of the novel problems successfully than students with performance goals (helping results). And students with learning goals worked harder at the novel problems (helping motivation), producing 50% more written work. Third, students with the learning goals were more likely to try to apply the principles they had learned to the novel problems (helping creativity and initiative).

The difference between performance goals and learning goals is that the former focuses only on the results (in a paradigm of failure/success), whereas the latter focuses on the path (and utilizes results as a source of information).

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Larger consequences: the implications for others

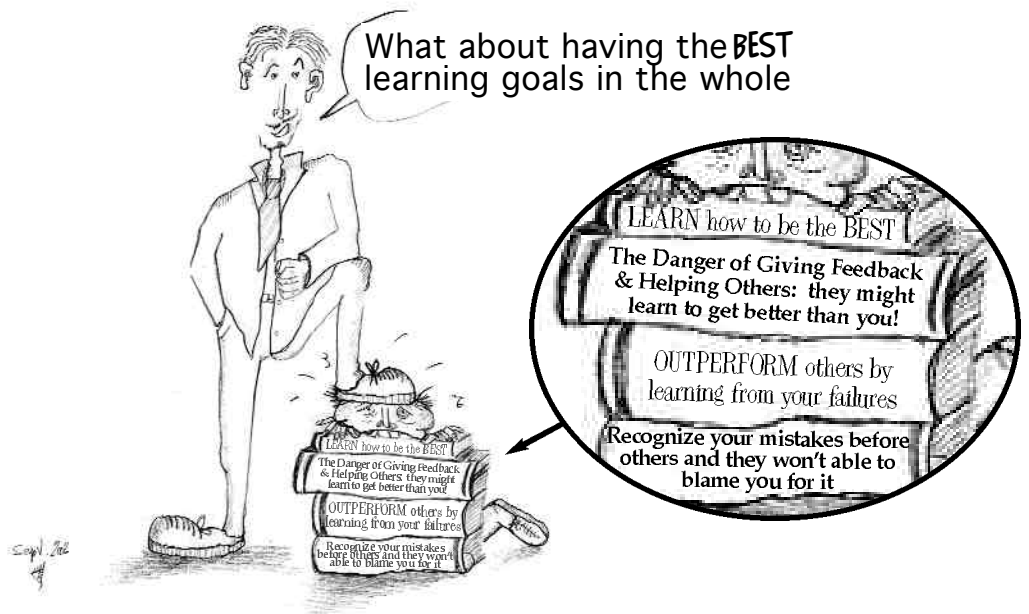
Learning goals have ripple effects on the people around us and our environment. The more we have performance goals for ourselves and others without larger



learning goals, the more we will model being driven by fear and judgment of poor performance, and the more people around us will be driven by fear and the need to prove themselves.

The ripple effects are reinforced by the competition that performance goals create; our performance is often a threat to others' performance, because when we do well they suffer by comparison. Competition thus becomes an additional source of fears for ourselves and our entourage.

Performance goals are about impressing others



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and reassuring ourselves, and therefore they create a space where others are more a threat than a support. By generating jealousy, fear of judgment, and competition, they in turn create an unsafe space for people to fail and learn in.

ecosystem* behavior”), and may connect other fathers to “being a nice and loved father.” The former will support those fathers to be on a path of experimentation, whereas the latter will connect those fathers to a state of performance.

Practically: It is a choice of each moment

At each moment, we are connected to a goal for a situation, whether consciously or unconsciously. We often have both a learning goal and a performance goal in the same situation. We want to perform well, to impress others and raise our self-esteem, and at the same time we want to learn and improve. Unfortunately, learning and performance goals are often in conflict with each other. At times the tasks that are best for learning are challenging ones that involve the risk of being confused, making mistakes, and possibly even making a poor impression on others. The tasks that are best for the performance goal of doing well, without making any mistakes, are the ones we're already good at - so by doing these tasks and avoiding the ones that are difficult or challenging, we don't learn very much.

Concretely: the distinction between performance and learning goals is often ambiguous

Many goals we adopt, consciously or unconsciously, can be easily categorized as performance or learning goals. “Get an A+ in Math,” for instance, or “be the best general manager of the company” are performance-driven goals, whereas “use Math as a way to learn to structure my thinking,” or “use my failures as opportunities to learn in the areas I feel stuck” are learning goals. Many goals, however, like “be a supportive father,” or “give a good presentation” are more difficult to categorize because we can be on the path of that goal in a learning mode or in a performance mode - not only in how we frame the goal but also in our choices at each moment.

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The important issue, therefore, is which goal is more important to people when learning and performance are in conflict with each other.

Not Learning: a Defense Mechanism

Our ability to be in a learning mode is also related to our belief that we can learn in the specific domain.

Research has demonstrated that people who typically have performance goals usually regard their ability as fixed: they are good at something or they're not, and that isn't likely to change. People who typically have learning goals usually regard their ability as

* Concepts from the Learning as Leadership Methodology



malleable, something that can change with practice and effort (Bandura & Dweck, 1985).

Note: A great deal of research has been done on these issues, much of it summarized very clearly in a book by Carol Dweck titled "Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development" (Dweck, 2000).

People who regard their ability or competence as fixed (entity theorists) are likely to have performance goals because each time they approach a task, it can reveal whether or not they have the necessary ability; success means they have what it takes, failure means they don't. People who regard their ability or competence as malleable (incremental theorists) have learning goals because they believe that, with effort, they can do better.

My experience is that most of us see ourselves as incremental theorists: we all like to think of ourselves as learners. However, we aren't typically aware of the places where we approach our abilities as fixed. In the Learning as Leadership (LaL) methodology, we actually explore the places where our ego has made each of us entity theorists and the consequences of that. We discover how choosing this belief in certain places is a defense mechanism that doesn't serve us, and of which we don't need to be at the mercy.

Why we so often confuse the difference between objectives and the path: a cultural trait

In our society, we are primarily taught performance goals - in school, in our careers, in our relationships. It often starts young. In school, we are driven by getting the A. We are all familiar with the symptoms, like competition, or feeling devastated when we get poor results. We are so focused on the performance that we hardly learn. We study with the goal of acing a test - but how many times have we forgotten the lesson we just learned, only a few days after the test, even when we get a good grade? Indeed, the goal was not to learn but to perform. Following the test, we ask each other what grade we got - not what we learned. In the number of years we have gone to school, how much of the information has stuck, compared to the time we spent? The ROI is usually very low.

When we go about our careers, we have been trained to think likewise. How much do we seek and praise feedback? Do we go to our performance reviews hoping they are going to be good and/or fearing they are going to be bad, or enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn? The examples are numerous: our mind is trained to think in terms of performance goals, and our interactions are driven by them.

Many of us may have sensed there is something "unhealthy" in this quest for performance goals, but we do not know how to step out of it, without rejecting it, and our responsibilities, altogether - which is not a

healthier solution. It is unlikely that our entourage will encourage us in the direction of learning goals, or at least not on a deep level. As previously stated, even those of us who do make a conscious effort to be in a learning mode, most likely do not see our "blind spots," or the places in which we are not in a true learning mode. In this paradigm shift, a very strong personal commitment is required to move forward on that learning path, but we also require support from others to help us identify our blind spots.

One of the goals of LaL's methodology, and more particularly of the One-Year Leadership Development Program, is to learn on a deep level to identify the ways in which we are caught in this cycle. We explore where it comes from, why we are so invested in it and what the costs and consequences are, so as

to be able to make a sustainable decision to get on a learning path. We then begin to develop out-of-the-paradigm alternatives such as learning goals and ecosystem* goals - goals that will ultimately allow us to choose learning over performance, and to re-center on that in each moment. We learn how to support each other in these learning goals, so that we become allies in learning vs. threats in competitive performance.

We learn to use concrete results and deliverables as a tool within the framework of our learning goals. Too often, we confuse learning goals with letting go of our responsibilities and the goal (i.e. I do not care what grades I get, as long as I learn a lot). Learning encompasses performance not as a goal but as a tool, not as a compass but as a thermometer, not as an end but as a means.

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