

# THE PRACTICAL REALITY OF GOAL SETTING THEORY: EVIDENCE FROM THE PERFORMANCE OF NURSES IN THE SUNYANI REGIONAL HOSPITAL OF GHANA

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## ABSTRACT

*Several studies on goal setting theory have shown that goals direct and sustain employee effort toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal irrelevant activities. Although the theory is a common research topic in most advanced countries, it is gradually being tested in other cultures such as the Sub-Saharan Africa. The current study, therefore, is an extension of existing research on goal setting theory as it describes the core elements of the theory, and how it relates to the performance of 100 registered nurses in the Sunyani Regional Hospital in Ghana. Consistent with some previous studies, a significantly positive relationship between goal acceptance, goal specificity and employee performance was found. Surprisingly, goal difficulty failed to support this relationship.*

*Key words: goal setting, task performance, goal specificity, goal challenge, goal acceptance*

## INTRODUCTION

The simplest fact of life is that human behaviour is based on conscious purposes, plans, and intentions that are unending in nature (Ryan, 1970). In other words, by nature, human behaviour is purposeful. Only those goals that have future valued outcomes are capable of directing and sustaining human behaviour (Locke & Latham, 2006). It is this basic fact of life that underlies the wide use of goals and the extensive application of goal setting theory in industry and commerce (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). But goals are useful only when they are specific, challenging, acceptable and attainable. They motivate action only when people both understand and accept them (Opoku, 2011). Specific goals have the potential of enhancing individual performance by directing effort toward desired end states, mobilising persistence, and encouraging the development and use of task strategies (Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011). Challenging goals are motivating because they require one to obtain more to be satisfied than do low, easy goals (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). Acceptable goals enhance employee motivation to

perform when they do not conflict with the employee's cultural and personal values (Opoku, 2011). Consequently, in so long as a person is committed to the goal, has the requisite ability to attain it, and does not have conflicting goals, there is always a positive, linear relationship between challenging goals and task performance (Locke & Latham, 2006).

The use of goal setting theory as a motivational technique for enhancing organisational productivity and employee performance has become very common in achievement oriented areas, such business, education and government. The acceptance and application of the goal setting theory in these fields derive from the assumption that each time employees are given cognitive challenge, they typically will work to meet that challenge (Locke & Latham, 2002). Known to be a well-established theory of motivation, the goal setting theory has been widely applied in organisational practice; effects of goal setting on group performance (Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011); effect of goal difficulty and positive reinforcement on endurance performance (Weinberg, Bruya, Garland & Jackson, 1990); new developments in goal setting and task performance (Locke & Latham, 2013); New directions in goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2013); and goal setting in theory and practice (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). Across these numerous studies, specific goals have raised performance levels, and individuals with specific goals have shown higher performance than those with vague goals, such as, "Do your best", "Improve the time spent on customer care", or "Sell as much as possible" (Locke & Latham, 2013).

However, while a substantial body of research has been conducted on the goal setting theory and its effect on employee performance in the advanced countries, not much research has been done in developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is against this background that this study is conducted. The aim of the study, therefore, is to examine the effects of goal specificity, goal challenge and goal acceptance on the performance of nurses in the Sunyani Regional Hospital in Ghana. Nurses working in some District Hospitals in the Brong-Ahafo Region have reported high levels of occupational stress as a result of heavy workloads which turn to derail their physical and psychological health (Juabie Douri, 2014).

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

### **Concept of goal setting**

Almost every cognitive task situation poses a set of requirements for those who seek to successfully complete the task (Locke & Latham, 2013). The set of task requirements, in this regard, may be conceptualised as goals that individuals strive to reach. Goals are the future valued outcomes that individuals seek to accomplish (Opoku, 2011). They are the object of human behavior, and are similar in meaning to the concepts of purpose and intent (Locke, 1969). Goals may be used in place of other concepts, such as, performance standards (a measuring rod for evaluating performance), quota (a minimum amount of work or production), work norm (a standard of acceptable behavior defined by a work group), task (a piece of work to be

accomplished), objective (the ultimate aim of an action or series of actions), deadline (a time limit for completing a task), and budget (a spending goal or limit). Goals have two important dimensions: the content dimension and intensity dimension (Locke & Latham, 1990). The content of a goal pertains to the features and objects of the goals themselves or the results being sought (*e.g.* the difficulty or specificity of the goal). Goal intensity pertains to the process by which a goal is set and accomplished (Locke & Latham, 2006). Intensity may be measured by using those factors such as the scope of the cognitive process involved, the degree of effort required, the importance of the goal or the context in which it is set (Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011).

Goals direct individuals' effort and provide a standard against which performance can be assessed (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). Although this notion was once viewed as counterintuitive, a great number of studies have shown that individuals may strive to meet very difficult but challenging goals if they understood and accepted those goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goals affect individual performance through four mechanisms. First, goals direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities. This is the directive function of goal setting. In their directive function, goals draw individual attention from goal-irrelevant activities. The directive mechanism of goal setting was supported in a study conducted by Rothkopf and Billington (1979). They found that students with specific learning goals, paid attention to and learned goal-relevant prose passages better than goal-irrelevant passages. The second mechanism of goal setting is that high goals lead to greater effort than low goals. This is the energising function of goals. The energising function has been supported by Bandura and Cervone (1983).

The third functional mechanism of goal setting is the persistence function. Goals affect persistence. As noted by previous researchers, "tight deadlines lead to a more rapid work pace than loose deadlines in the laboratory as well as in the field (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 707). Locke and Latham (2002) submitted that employees tend to work faster and more intensely for a short period or to work more slowly and less intensely for a long period when faced with difficult but attainable goals. The final mechanism of goal setting is the actionable function. As noted by Wood and Locke (1990), challenging goals affect individual action by leading to the arousal, discovery, and/or use of task-relevant knowledge and strategies. It is on this basis that all human action is said to be purposeful.

In summary, goals direct and regulate individual job performance through four interrelated mechanisms: direction, effort, persistence and strategy formulation (Bandura & Cervone, 1983). As noted by Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009, p. 90):

"...specific goals can boost motivation and performance by leading people to focus their attention on specific objectives (Locke & Bryan, 1969), increase their effort to achieve these objectives (Bandura & Cervone, 1983), persist in the face of setbacks (Latham & Locke, 1975) and develop new strategies to better deal with complex challenges to goal attainment (Wood & Locke, 1990)".

The goal-performance relationship is strongest when all moderators in the relationships exist. These moderators include goal commitment, goal importance, self-efficacy, feedback, and task complexity (Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009). For goals to lead to performance, there must be high goal commitment on the part of the individuals pursuing those goals. An assigned goal can affect job performance only when individuals initially accept the goal and remain committed to it (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). Goal commitment refers to adherence to a goal, and resistance to changing it at a latter point in time (Tubbs, 1993). Locke and Latham (2002) identified two main approaches for building goal commitment among employees in the workplace: 1) increasing goal importance, including the desirability of the outcomes people expect from working to attain their goals, and 2) fostering self-efficacy which pertains to people's believe that they can attain the goal (Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009). Self-efficacy has also been defined as a judgment of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance (Bandura, 1986).

Another important moderator of goal-performance relationship is performance feedback. The underlying tenet of feedback in enhancing the goal-performance relationship is that once the goal is assigned to the employee, it remains in the periphery of his consciousness as a reference point for guiding and giving meaning to subsequent mental and physical action. Individuals need feedback in order to track their progress (Locke & Latham, 2006). Thus, for challenging goals to lead to high performance, adequate and unbiased feedback is necessary (Heslin, Carson, & Vandewalle, 2009). Not all feedback may enhance the performance potential of the individual. In fact feedback has the potential of leading to feelings of discouragement and anger (Kluger & DeNisi, 2000). Unless it is given in a manner most likely to bring about a positive change in behaviour, feedback may discourage future performance (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Another well-established moderator of the goal-performance link at the individual level is task complexity. Wood (1986) identified three aspects of task complexity: 1) component complexity (signified by the number of acts and information cues involved in completing a task, 2) coordinative complexity (indicated by the type and number of relationships among the acts and information cues, and 3) dynamic complexity (reflecting the degree of changes in the acts and information cues over time, as well as the relationship between them (Heslin, Carson, & Vandewalle, 2009). Generally, goal effects are dependent on the ability of the individual to discover appropriate task strategies (Locke & Latham, 2002). The more complex the task, the smaller the goal-performance effect and vice versa (Wood, Mento, & Locke, 1987). If the task is simple, goals affect performance mainly through motivational mechanisms. For complex tasks, the individual requires the discovery and implementation of effective task strategies (Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011), and because it is difficult to identify effective task strategies, the effect of goals on performance is less pronounced in most cases.

## CONCEPT OF PERFORMANCE

Job performance is an important construct in human resource management. Most of what human resource managers do is geared towards having a positive impact on individual and organisational performance (Schuler & Jackson, 2006). Consequently, many organisations have spent considerable time and effort in attracting, retaining and motivating a highly performing set of individuals whose collective effort, as noted by Sonnentag and Frese (2002) is capable of helping management to meet organizational goals; to deliver the goods and services consistent with the needs and expectations of customers; and to achieve competitive advantage in the face of global competition.

Performance is a multi-dimensional and dynamic concept; a more comprehensive view of job performance cannot be achieved unless it embraces both behavior and outcome. As espoused by Sonnentag, Volmer and Sychala (2010), when conceptualising performance, one has to differentiate between a process aspect (behavioral) and an outcome aspect (results). The behavioral aspect, according to Campbell (1990) is what people do while at work; the action itself. Behaviors are the mental and physical efforts applied to task. They include “sales conversation with customers, teaching statistics to undergraduate students, programming computer software or assembling parts of a car engine” (Sonnentag, Volmer & Sychala, 2010, p. 427).

Following the preceding review, performance may be described as what the organization hires one to do, and do well (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). In this regard, only actions which can be scaled (i.e. measured) are considered to constitute performance, as performance is not defined by the actions in itself but by those judgmental and evaluative processes surrounding those actions (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993).

The outcome aspect of performance on the other hand, refers to the consequence or result of the individual’s behavior (Sonnentag & Frese, 2001). The four actions - sales conversation with customers, teaching statistics to undergraduate students, programming computer software or assembling parts of a car engine” - as listed under the behavioral aspect of performance above might result in “sales contracts, student’s knowledge in statistical procedures, a software product or numbers of cars assembled” (Sonnentag, Volmer, & Sychala, 2010, p. 427).

A review of the literature has shown that while the behavioral (input aspect) and result (outcome aspect) of job performance are empirically related, they do not overlap completely. This is so because the outcome aspect does not solely depend on the behavior of the performer. A typical example has been cited by Sonnentag and Frese (2002, p. 5) as follows:

“Imagine a teacher delivers a perfect reading lesson (the behavioral aspect of performance), but one or two of his pupils nevertheless, do not improve their reading skills because of their intellectual deficits (outcome aspect of performance). In this example for instance, the behavior of the teacher does not exactly reflect the outcome of his performance”.



Although individual and organisational performances are both important in achieving desired organisational results, this study explicitly deals with individual job performance, and does not consider group, team or organisational performance. Thus, the next section of the chapter summarizes research on individual job performance and addresses issues such as the definition, conceptualization and measurement of individual job performance.

## INDIVIDUAL JOB PERFORMANCE

Though much research has gone into the area of individual Job performance, it is one concept whose definition is still debatable in human resource management. While there may be several conceptualisation of individual job performance, current definitions of individual performance tend to focus on the behaviors or actions of individuals, and not the results or outcomes of those behaviors and actions (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Murphy (1989) buttress this stand by indicating that the result aspect of job performance are not always functional to the organization. According to him, employees may try to maximise results at the expense of other equally important requirements of an effective and efficient performance. Consequently, Murphy defined performance as behaviours that are related to the goals of the organisation.

One definition of individual performance which is widely endorsed was presented by Campbell, McCloy, Opler and Sager (1993, p. 40). They defined job performance as:

“...synonymous with behavior. It is something that people actually do and can be observed. By definition, it includes only those actions or behaviors that are relevant to the organisation’s goals and that can be scaled (measured) in terms of each individual’s proficiency (that is, level of contribution). Performance is what the organisation hires one to do, and do well. Performance is not the consequence or results of an action, it is the action itself.....and consists of goal-relevant actions that are under the control of the individual”.

Three notions accompany this definition: (1) job performance should be defined in terms of behavior rather than results; (2) job performance includes only those behaviors that are relevant to the organisation’s goals; and (3) job performance is multidimensional. This definition, according to Rotundo and Sackett (2002) is consistent with other definitions of the concept.

While the definition of job performance seems to swing towards the behaviors of the performer, other researchers have managed to include the result aspect of job performance in their definitions. A typical example is the definition given by Viswesvaran and Ones (2000). They defined job performance as those scalable actions, behaviors and outcomes that employees engage in, that are linked with and contribute to organisational goals.

The lack of agreement on a common definition of individual job performance stems from the many dimensions of the concept. As noted by Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe and Waters-Marsh (1998), the definition of an individuals’ performance is moderated by the personality, values,

attitudes and ability of the individuals which, in combination, affect their perceptions and motivation, and ultimately influence their work performance. Performance, in their opinion depends on the skills and abilities of employees working in an enabling environment.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

The Goal Setting Theory, which is the main foundation on which this study is built, was originally developed by Edwin Locke in 1990. The theory is based on Ryan's (1970) premise that conscious goals affect action. Locke began to consider goal setting as an approach to human motivation in the mid-1960s. The primary tenet of goal setting theory is that specific, difficult and challenging goals lead to higher level of task performance than easy and vague goals, such as, the exhortation to "do one's best" (Locke, 1969; Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke & Latham, 2006). The theory assumes that human behavior is purposeful (Locke & Latham, 2006) and that goal setting helps to direct and sustain behavior toward performing a particular action (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). In other words, goal-directedness is an essential attribute of human action. Locke chose the term goal setting for three reasons:

"First, it was philosophically sound. Second, it was consistent with introspective evidence revealing that human action as such is normally purposeful. Underlying such action is a fundamental biological principle: that all living organisms engage in goal-directed action as a necessity of survival. Third, it was practical; the approach worked" (Locke, 1996, p. 118).

From the background of organisational psychology, Locke observed that "the conscious mind is the active part of one's psychology, and by focusing one's mind at the conceptual level, everyone has the power of volition which consciously regulates one's thinking and consequent action" (Locke & Latham, 2005 as in Ken & Michael, 2005, p.128). The goal setting theory does not deny the existence of subconsciousness or its power to affect action. The subconscious is routinely activated by our conscious purposes and also determines our emotional responses (Locke, 1976). However, as an organisational psychologist, Locke was concerned mainly with how people perform work task, focusing on task performance goals. Thus, the goal setting theory is based on the belief that most human action at work is consciously directed (Ken & Michael, 2005).

Goals are capable of motivating behaviour if they are specific, challenging and acceptable (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). Goal specificity reflects the extent to which a goal suggests a precise target (Opoku, 2011). Goals that motivate behaviour are specific, quantifiable and measurable. Goals are specific when they are expressed with reference to a particular quantity such as mass, volume, height, weight, units or length (Opoku, 2011; Locke & Latham, 2013). Specific goals are more precise and straight-forward. They reduce ambiguity about expectations and can direct employee effort more efficiently and reliably (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). They also provide management with something concrete on which to gauge subordinate's performance. In fact, vague goals such as "Do your best," "Improve the time spent on customer service," or "Sell

as much as possible,” have the same effect as no goal at all (Opoku, 2011). The ultimate effect of such goals is that they discourage the individual from higher performance (Ryan, 1970).

Goals must also be difficult to inspire better performance, but they must not be so difficult that people cannot reach them. In other words, goals must be challenging in order to motivate higher performance (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995). A goal is challenging if it has the capacity to stretch employee effort towards peak performance (Opoku, 2011). Locke and Latham (1990) opined that the habit of setting difficult goals can increase their perceived challenge and enhance the amount of effort expended to achieve them. In other words, more difficult goals tend to lead to increased effort and performance as long as they are realistic and feasible (Opoku, 2011). However, if goals are too difficult, they tend to lose their motivational effect as they become unrealistic and unattainable. Alternatively, if goals are too easy to accomplish, individuals see them as not likely to advance their careers, and this does not motivate the individual to perform.

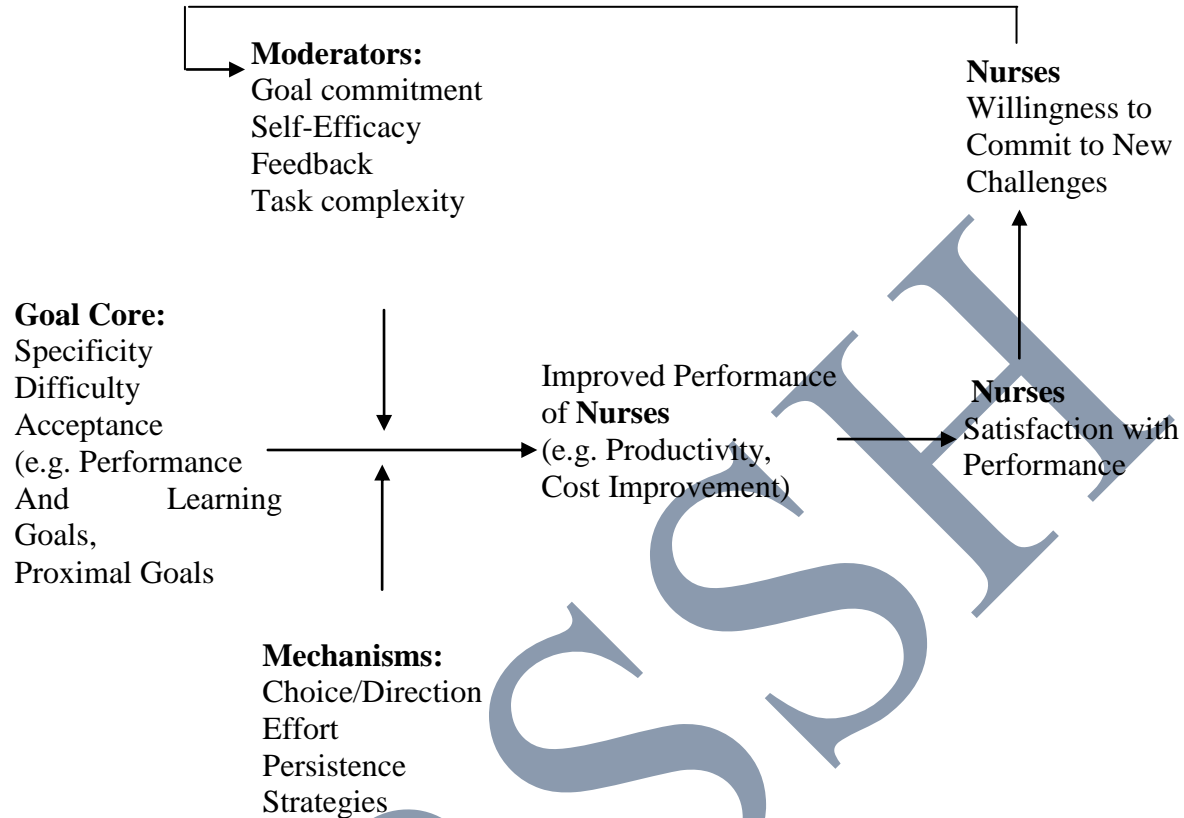
One of the most important elements of goal-setting theory is the acceptance of goals by the subordinate. Goal acceptance is the degree to which the individual's behaviour is influenced by a particular goal (Opoku, 2011). It occurs when the goals are seen as being attainable or beneficial to the person (Locke & Latham, 2002). To make them acceptable, goals must not conflict with the person's cultural or personal values. Goal acceptance becomes easier if the individual is encouraged to participate in the goal-setting process (Locke, 2001). According to Locke (2001), the goals individuals set for themselves are the prime determinants of their work behavior and subsequent performance. In support of Locke's assertion, Locke and Latham (2006) maintained that conscious goals have powerful influence on what people think and do.

Following the preceding review, three hypotheses have been formulated for this study:

- a) Specific goals lead to a decrease in individual job performance
- b) Accepted goals yields lower individual job performance
- c) Difficulty/challenging goals yield lower individual job performance

Given the theories and concepts involved in this study, the conceptual framework in figure 1 has been adapted for the study.



**Figure 1: Essential Elements of Goal-Setting Theory And The High-Performance Cycle**

**Source:** Adapted from Locke and Latham (2002).

The framework provides a broad view of the goal setting theory and how it influences employee performance. The model suggests that given the core goal elements (goal specificity, goal difficulty and goal acceptance), as moderated by goal commitment, goal importance, self-efficacy, feedback, and task complexity, it is possible that the employee's performance would increase. The motivation for improved job performance is as a result of the employee's satisfaction with their job which, in turn, will increase their willingness to commit to new challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to examine the effects of goal specificity, goal challenge and goal acceptance on the performance of nurses (registered general nurses, registered midwives and enrolled nurses) in the Sunyani Regional Hospital. The Sunyani Regional Hospital was purposively chosen because it is the only referral hospital for all the District and Municipal hospitals in the region. It also serves patients from within and outside the region.

The study adopted a purely quantitative approach and used both primary and secondary data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). All category of nurses formed part of the study population. Together, there were 310 nurses in the Sunyani Municipal Hospital. The selection of nurses for the study was based on assessability and convenience as some nurses deliberately refused to answer the questionnaire. The same set of questionnaire was administered to all the categories of nurses. The questionnaires were closed ended using Likert's four scales. The drop off and pick up technique was used in the administration of the questionnaires. Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey. After 10 days, a reminder was sent by way of text messages to all participants.

The data collected for the study were analysed, using the IBM Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 18 software. The SPSS is one of the most commonly used computer software program for data analysis in social science research (Punch, 2005). The raw data collected through a survey questionnaire were transferred into codes after editing in order to make them possible for the computer to use. Correlation tests were conducted to analysis the relationship between each of the elements of goal setting (goal specificity, goal challenge and goal acceptance) and nurse's performance at 0.05 level of significant.

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested by using Cronbach's Alpha or the Alpha Coefficient. The factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation was first done for all the study variables. Next, the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin Test (KMO), which is a measure of sampling adequacy, was conducted for each variable, and the results indicated that they were all acceptable as in Table 1.

**Table 1: Validity and reliability analyses for the measurement scales**

Indicators	No. of items	KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Sig. Value)	Cronbach's Alpha
Goal acceptance	4	.637	45.803 (.000)	.643
Goal specificity	3	.664	46.209 (.000)	.697
Goal difficulty	3	.659	51.129 (.000)	.712
Goal commitment	3	.583	19.306 (.000)	.304
Self-efficacy	3	.661	42.963 (.000)	.684

<b>Task complexity</b>	3	.598	38.643 (.000)	.642
<b>Feedback</b>	4	.827	174.481 (.000)	.873
<b>Individual Job Performance</b>	3	.627	60.384(.000)	.723
<b>Performance satisfaction and willingness to pursue higher goals</b>	3	.624	54.354	.703

The pre-testing results were significant in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) with all variables having eigenvalue larger than 1, and exceeding factor loading of 0.500 with a standard reliability of 0.70 (Nunally & Bernstein, 1994). The measurement scales chosen for this study met the acceptable standard of validity and reliability analysis, and can, therefore, help the researcher to test the hypothesis of the study. According to Sekaran (2005), the closer the reliability coefficient to 1.00, the more acceptable is the construct measure. In general, reliabilities less than 0.60 are considered poor, and those in the range of over 0.800 are considered good and acceptable. In this study, all the research variables, except goal commitment and task complexity exceeded the minimum non-acceptable requirement of 0.600. The questionnaires were therefore, valid and reliable.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section describes the results of the study. The section is divided into three main segments. The first section presents the results of the correlation tests, while the second section provides the interpretation and discussion of the results based on the three hypotheses formulated for the study. The third and final section focuses on the partial correlation of goal setting and individual job performance. The results of the correlation test are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Correlation coefficients among the variables in the study**

Variables	Goal acceptance	Goal Specificity	Goal challenge	Goal commitment	Self efficacy	Task complexity	Feedback	Individual performance
Goal acceptance	1	.520	-.065	.154	.521	.566	.376	.559
Goal Specificity	.520	1	-.099	.177	.346	.645	.517	.443
Goal challenge	-.065	-.099	1	.115	-.060	-.237	-.117	-.075
Goal commitment	.154	.177	.115	1	.218	.140	.086	.290
Self efficacy	.521	.346	-.060	.218	1	.432	.391	.480
Task complexity	.566	.645	-.237	.140	.432	1	.624	.564
Feedback	.376	.517	-.117	.086	.391	.624	1	.618
Individual performance	.559	.443	-.075	.290	.480	.564	.618	1

All at a significant level of 0.000, where  $n = 79$  (two-tailed).

Each cell in table 1 presents a correlation coefficient between any two of the variables in the study. The significant level was set at 0.05 for each correlation coefficient. Thus, the p-value would have to be less than .05 to be declared significant, and where the p-value is less than .001, the null hypothesis is rejected and vice versa. The interpretation of the correlation coefficient was done by establishing the strength of relationship between the variables, the statistical significance of the relationship, and the square of the correlation coefficient. All sixty four (64) correlations were statistically significant. The correlations of all variables with goal challenge tended to be lower, while those with task complexity and individual performance were

highest. In general, the results of the analysis suggest that there is a significantly positive correlation among the variables in the study.

## **ANALYSIS OF PEARSON-PRODUCT MOMENT CORRELATION RESULTS OF KEY VARIABLES IN THE STUDY**

Based on the results of the correlation analysis, the following interpretations, discussions and conclusions are offered.

### **Hypothesis 1:**

#### *The correlation between goal specificity and individual job performance*

The correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of goal specificity and individual job performance was 0.443, at a significance level of 0.000 where  $n = 89$  (two-tailed). The results show that there is a significant relationship between goal specificity and individual job performance. The positive coefficient implies that as goals become specific, employees are motivated to perform. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) was 0.196, indicating that about 19.6% of the variation in nurses job performance is explained by the variation in goal specificity. Contrarily, 80.4% of the variation in the nurse's job performance is unexplained by variations in goal specificity. As the p-value (0.000) was less than 0.05, it is declared significant, meaning that the null hypothesis; "Specific goals lead to a decrease individual job performance is rejected.

The hypothesised results on the relationship between goal specificity and job performance confirm the submission of Yearta, Maitlis, and Briner (1995) that specific goals reduce ambiguity about expectations, and can therefore, direct employee effort towards performance goals more efficiently and reliably. The results also corroborate the findings of Rothkopf and Billington (1979) that specific learning goals direct students' effort toward maximum performance in their examinations. Similarly, the results of the study support the conclusions of Locke and Latham (2013) that across several studies individuals with specific goals have shown higher performance than those with vague goals, such as, "Do your best", "Improve the time spent on customer care", or "Sell as much as possible". The results also support the conclusions drawn by Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009, p. 90) that "specific goals can boost motivation and performance by leading people to focus their attention on specific objectives (Locke & Bryan, 1969), increase their effort to achieve these objectives (Bandura & Cervone, 1983), persist in the face of setbacks (Latham & Locke, 1975) and develop new strategies to better deal with complex challenges to goal attainment (Wood & Locke, 1990)".

The implication of this result to management of nurses is that they can improve the performance of their nurses by ensuring that the goals set for them are specific.



**Hypothesis 2:***The correlation between goal acceptance and individual job performance*

The correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of goal acceptance and individual job performance was 0.559, at a significance level of 0.000 where  $n = 89$  (two-tailed). Again, the analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between goal acceptance and individual job performance. The positive coefficient implies that as goals acceptance increases, employees are motivated to perform. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) was 0.31, indicating that about 31% of the variation in nurses job performance is explained by the variation in their goal acceptance. Contrarily, 69% of the variation in the nurse's job performance is unexplained by variations in goal acceptance. As the p-value (0.000) was less than 0.05, it is declared significant, meaning that the null hypothesis; "Accepted goals yields lower individual job performance is rejected.

The preceding results indicate that an employee's performance could be improved if he or she understood and accepted the goals set for himself or herself. The conclusions are based on the directive function of goal setting that goals direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities as noted by Rothkopf and Billington (1979). The results also support the findings of Yearta, Maitlis, and Briner (1995) and those of Locke and Latham (2002) that individuals may strive to meet very difficult but challenging goals if they understood and accepted those goals. However, while the results tend to support the findings of a great number of studies, they appear to partially support the findings of Opoku (2011) who noted that acceptable goals can only enhance employee motivation to perform if and only if they do not conflict with the employee's cultural and personal values. The implication of this result to management, particularly those in hospital management in Ghana is that they can improve the performance of their employees by taking measures to ensure that the goals set for employees do not conflict with the employee's cultural and personal values as this can reduce the level of goal acceptance and performance.

**Hypothesis 3:***The correlation between goal challenge/difficulty and individual job performance*

The correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of goal challenge/difficulty and individual job performance was -0.075, at a significance level of 0.483 where  $n = 89$  (two-tailed). Again, the analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between goal challenge/difficulty and individual job performance. The negative coefficient implies that as goals difficulty increases, employee's performance increases. The coefficient of determination was  $r^2 = 0.0056$ , indicating that about 0.56% of the variation in nurse's job performance is explained by the variation in their goal acceptance. Contrarily, 99.44% of the variation in the nurse's job performance is unexplained by variations in goal acceptance. As the p-value (0.483) was greater than 0.05, it is declared significant, meaning that the null hypothesis; "Difficulty/challenging goals yield lower individual job performance is accepted.

The preceding results imply that employee performance decreases when the goals set for them are challenging. These results do not support the findings of Opoku (2011) who found a significantly positive relationship between challenging goals and individual job performance. They also do not corroborate the conclusions of Ambrose and Kulik (1999) that challenging goals are motivating because they require one to obtain more to be satisfied than do low, easy goals. Again, the results of the hypothesis test fail to support the findings of Locke and Latham (1990) who opined that challenging goals have the capacity to stretch employee effort towards peak performance. The results, however, support the findings of Yearta, Maitlis, and Briner, (1995) who submitted that difficult goals tend to lose their motivational effect as they become unrealistic and unattainable. The management of nurses in the Sunyani Regional Hospital may reconsider the level of difficulty in their assigned goals to the nurses. Too difficult goals are often perceived as being unattainable and this can discourage the nurses from putting up their best.

## ANALYSIS OF PARTIAL CORRELATION OF GOAL SETTING AND INDIVIDUAL JOB PERFORMANCE

The goal-performance relationship is strongest when all the moderators, including goal commitment, goal importance, self-efficacy, feedback, and task complexity exist (Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009). Thus, in order to explore the actual relationship between the independent variable (as measured by goal setting) and the dependent variable (as measured by individual job performance), the partial correlation coefficient was computed. The computation of a partial correlation coefficient was useful because with as much as four mediating variables, including goal commitment, self-efficacy, feedback and task complexity, the researcher suspected that the relationship between the dependent and independent variables might have been influenced or confounded by the impact of those intervening variables. Thus, by statistically controlling for scores on the intervening variables, it paved the way for the researcher to identify a clearer picture of the actual relationship between the main variables of interest, as this operation nullifies the effect of all mediating variables. The partial correlation coefficient of goal setting and individual job performance is presented in table 3.

**Table 3: Partial correlation of goal setting and individual job performance**

Controlled variables	Dependent variable	Correlation
Goal commitment, self-efficacy, feedback and task complexity	Individual job performance	
	<b>Independent variable (Goal setting)</b>	
	Goal acceptance	0.212

Goal specificity	-0.119
Goal difficulty	-0.058

As shown in Table 3, there was a weak, positive, partial correlation between goal setting (goal acceptance, goal specificity and goal difficulty) and individual job performance. The coefficients for the variables were 0.212 for goal acceptance, -0.119 for goal specificity and -.058 for goal difficulty. The original partial correlation coefficient was 0.035, at a 0.057 level of significance for goal acceptance, .075 for goal specificity and .607 for goal difficulty with a 79 degree of freedom. As the p-values (0.057, 0.075 and 0.607) are greater than 0.01, it is declared insignificant, meaning that the intervening mediators had a very strong effect on the strength of relationship between goal setting and individual job performance among nurses in the Sunyani Regional Hospital.

The normal Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients between each of the three goal setting variables – goal acceptance, goal specificity, goal difficulty – and individual job performance were 0.559, .443 and -.075 at a significance level of 0.000 as shown in table 2. Comparing the two sets of correlation coefficients, it is logical to conclude that the observed relationship between goal setting and individual job performance is due mainly to the influence of the four intervening variables.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Goal-setting theory is a well-established motivation theory in industrial and organisational psychology. The theory is consistent with the idea that encouraging people to pursue goals that are specific, acceptable and difficult will yield better performance than encouraging them to pursue vague goals, such as, “do your best” (Locke & Latham, 1990). This assertion has been supported in over 500 empirical studies (e.g., Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011; Heslin, Carson & Vandewalle, 2009; Locke & Latham, 2006; Locke, & Latham, 2002), and across these studies, goal setting has been used extensively as a motivational technique for directing individuals’ effort at work and providing standards against which employee performance can be assessed (Kleingeld, Heleen & Arends, 2011). In each of these studies, the practical significance of the theory was found to depend on the many mediators and moderators that determine its efficacy and applicability in performance management.

Although this study has supported the general notion that goal setting, particularly specific and acceptable goals motivate employees to perform, the results require management to exercise some caution, particularly when setting challenging goals to regulate performance behaviours. As challenging goals become too difficult, they tend to lose their motivational effect because employees tend to perceive them as being unrealistic and unattainable. Employee performance is frequently described as a joint function of ability and motivation. As submitted by Locke and Latham (1990: 223), “if the goals set are not within the ability of the person to

attain, they will not be attained". In short, performance increases with the level of goal difficulty only when the person working to attain the goal is committed to achieving it and has the ability to do so (Yearta, Maitlis, & Briner, 1995).

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## APPENDIX 1: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR RESPONDENTS

### Introduction

This survey is designed to gather information on the performance of nurses in the Sunyani Municipal Hospital based on the practical reality of the goal setting theory. By this survey questionnaire, you are invited to share your views on the issues under investigation. Your participation is voluntary, and your responses are required for purely academic work.

Thank you for your time and effort.

Dr. Felix Kwame Opoku

### SECTION A: Background characteristics of respondents

**Sex:** Male  Female

**Highest qualification:** Masters  First degree  Diploma  Others

**Rank/Position:** .....

**Category:** Registered general nurse  Registered midwife  Enrolled nurse

**Length of service:** .....years

**Age:** 18 – 25  26 – 35  36 – 45  46 – 55  Above 55

### SECTION B: Survey items for the variables in the study

**Instruction:** Tick the appropriate column. The columns are on a scale of 1 – 4, with 1 showing Least Agree (LA), 2 showing Agree (A), 3 showing Highly Agree (HA) and 4 showing Totally Agree (TA).

<b>(a) Goal acceptance</b> Your response to these items indicates your acceptance of the goal assigned to you for the year	1	2	3	4
1. After reading the instructions, the goal assigned to me seems to be very interesting				
2. For goals like the one assigned to me, I do not need a reward				
3. The goal assigned to me is full of fun				
4. Achieving this goal is my main priority				
<b>(b) Goal specificity scale</b> Your response to these items indicates the degree of specificity of the goal assigned to you this year				
5. The goal assigned to me at the beginning of the year was specific				
6. The requirements for achieving the goal assigned to me are straightforward				
7. Anyone can easily understand the demands of the goal assigned to me				
<b>(c) Goal difficulty/challenge scale</b> Your response to these items indicates the degree of difficulty associated with the goal assigned to you this year				
8. The goal assigned to me is very difficult to achieve				
9. The goal assigned to me is very challenging				
10. Attaining this goal would demand a great deal of effort				
<b>(d) Goal commitment scale</b> Your response to these items indicates your committed you are to the goal assigned to you this year				
11. I am strongly committed to pursuing the goal assigned to me				
12. It would take much to make me abandon the goal assigned to me				
13. I think the goal assigned to me is a good one to shoot for				
<b>(e) Self-efficacy scale</b> Your response to these items indicates your self-efficacy toward the goal				

assigned to you this year				
14. I am confident that I can efficiently deal with unexpected events surrounding the goal assigned to me				
15. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations				
16. I can achieve challenging goals if I invest the necessary effort				
<b>(f) Task complexity scale</b> Your response to these items indicates the complexity of the goal assigned to you for the year				
17. The goal assigned to me is simple to understand				
18. I probably would not struggle too much in order to achieve the goal assigned to me				
19. It would be very embarrassing to fail to achieve the goal assigned to me				
<b>(g) Feedback scale</b> Your response to these items indicates how much feedback you receive on your performance in respect to the goal assigned to you this year				
20. I receive useful and constructive feedback from my manager				
21. I am given adequate feedback about my performance				
22. I receive feedback that helps me improve on my performance				
23. When I do a good job, I receive the praise and recognition I deserve				
<b>(h) Nurses performance scale</b> Your response to these items indicates the assessment of your performance based on the goal assigned to you this year				
24. Based on my performance to date, it is likely that by the end of the year I will be able to meet or exceed the requirements of the goal assigned to me				
25. I am satisfied with the progress I am making toward meeting the goal assigned to me				
26. I am very pleased with my performance on the goal assigned to me				
<b>(i) Nurses performance satisfaction and willingness to pursue higher</b>				

<b>goals scale</b>				
Your response to these items indicates the assessment of your satisfaction with your performance and your willingness to commit to new challenges next year				
27. My performance so far has given me the confidence that I can achieve higher goals than the goal assigned to me				
28. I am prepared and willing to accept more challenging goals in the future				
29. I am satisfied with my performance on the goal assigned to me				

### CLOSING REMARKS

Thank you once again for your time.