

Abstract of thesis entitled:

The Ethical Costs of Goal Setting: An Examination of Framing and Self-Esteem Effects

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Abstract

Goal setting theory has been widely used in organizations to enhance performance and effectiveness. However, the potential engagement in deviant behavior when concrete goals are adopted has not been thoroughly explored. This study examined the effects of framing and self-esteem on unethical behavior among 114 undergraduate students in Hong Kong. It aimed to underscore the potential pitfalls of goal setting in terms of performance and ethical tradeoffs. Apart from examining the effects of the mere presence of a goal, two other conditions are framed as either offering a reward for goal attainment or a punishment in the case of failure. Self-esteem was measured by an adapted task specific self-esteem scale (Greenhaus & Badin, 1974). Unethical behavior was operationalized as the number of false reporting (overstatement) in completing a series of anagram tasks across eight trials. It was hypothesized that framing (reward versus punishment) and self-esteem (high versus low) would affect the extent to which one engages in unethical behavior. Results showed that the four conditions (do your best, assigned goal, assigned goal with reward and assigned goal with punishment) differed in effort levels; participants in the two framing conditions created more words compared to the “do your best” and “assigned goal” conditions. In addition, overstatement of results was also more prevalent among the framing conditions in terms of frequency and magnitude. No differences were found across self-esteem levels.