

Establishing Academic Goals and Expectations

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Academic focus is critical for a school that is serious about the pursuit of better academic outcomes for students (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; 1998). While school strategic planning is the task of the Board of Trustees in New Zealand, the principal, as CEO of the board and academic leader, can strongly influence the academic focus through the goal setting process. Goals are instrumental in creating the *academic climate* required for a school to improve or to sustain performance at high levels. Academic goal focus (that is, a few, clearly articulated academic goals) is a particularly effective leadership behaviour because it helps to create a coherent improvement focus (Robinson, 2011).

Recently we asked some senior and middle leaders in schools to recall their key academic goals or targets and then compared their recall to the goals and targets in their charters. We then attempted to code and compare the goal knowledge of the two groups.

Why coding was nearly impossible

This proved to be a very difficult task because often we could not distinguish in schools' planning documents between strategic goals, annual goals and targets. In addition, the number of goals, targets, aims and objectives (as they were named) that were included in the documentation, made it hard to identify what was really important to the school.

Another reason coding was challenging was due to the focus of many of the 'targets'. Frequently what schools described as targets we would call 'actions' or 'strategies for improvement' (e.g., implement a programme) because they referred to actions rather than the outcome that was really being 'targeted'— which was raising the achievement of the students. So we were then challenged as to whether we should code what the school called 'targets' or what we interpreted as being actual 'targets for student achievement'. We opted for the latter approach.

Is this just semantics? Does it matter that we use a term to refer to different things? If we want teachers, students and families to be clear on what we are *targeting* as a result of implementing academic counselling or a particular programme, for example, then it probably does matter. The focus is not just a matter of putting a new initiative in place; it is about seeking improved student outcomes as a result. Being more precise in our language and written planning can help us to be more precise in our thinking and actions.

Why recalling goals and targets was probably difficult for senior and middle leaders

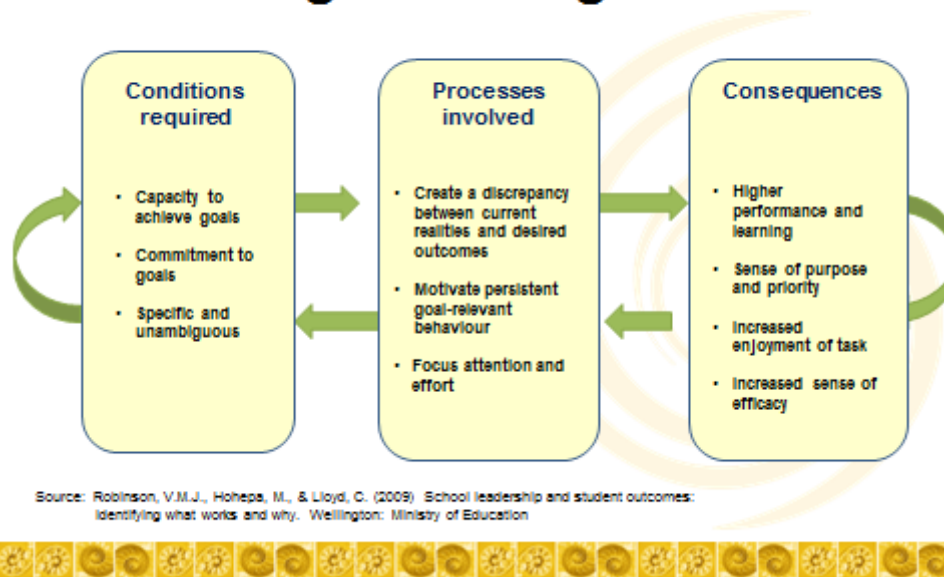
Sometimes the plethora of goals and targets that related to retention, engagement and achievement of students made it virtually impossible for anyone to recall them all, and to identify the current school priorities. The overall effect of the sheer number of goals/targets/objectives and so on, was that many goals and targets were not memorable. In our view, good communication of a clear plan would enable nearly all staff, students and families to remember them.

Our findings

When leaders' recall of goals was compared with their school's charter we found that 21% of the school leaders had high goal knowledge and 43% had low goal knowledge. Where schools had high goal knowledge, the senior and middle leaders were most likely to be aligned in their understanding of what the goals were. On at least one occasion, overall goal knowledge was low (when compared to the school's written goals) but the senior and middle leaders were well aligned on recalling two of the goals indicating that these two goals were the ones that people were probably really attending to.

What we know about good goal setting

How goal setting works



Effective goal setting requires three key conditions. Firstly, goals need to be clear to all. The more goals you have, the less likely you are to be clear about what the goals are and how to achieve them. They also need to be specific and unambiguous otherwise success in achieving them cannot be measured. So the most basic requirement of good goals in our view is to have few of them and to have them clearly measurable. Recent research on a sample of 95 experienced principals in New Zealand indicated that 71% of their goals were categorised as 'vague performance goals' rather than 'specific' and measurable (Sinnema & Robinson, 2012). This research suggests that writing clear and specific goals is a major challenge in itself.

In the case of the plans we reviewed recently, when schools really did write student-focused targets, they were specific. But specificity is not enough in itself. Some targets were specific but the reader was unable to judge the *worth* or *value* of the target because there was no baseline data. Targeting a 78% achievement rate in a qualification is specific but if the school achieved 30% last year, the target is probably not realistic and instead of being motivating, could be very demotivating for staff due to the unrealistic size of the gap between the baseline level of performance and the target. Specific targets may also be of questionable value when they are not challenging, such as when the target requires the same level of improvement as has been achieved in prior years. To make a judgement

about the value of a target, the reader has to know the baseline level of performance and this should be evident in plans.

Secondly, everyone involved in realising the goals needs to be committed to them, and they can't be committed to goals they do not know about or can't remember. Further, staff have to believe that the goals are worthwhile, and that they are the right goals for the school at a given time. So, if everyone in the school has identified absence as a core challenge but it is not targeted as a priority by the school's leadership, staff are unlikely to be committed to alternative goals. Commitment is developed by working through the formulation of goals and targets collectively and really looking at the data and where the immediate challenge exists.

Thirdly, people have to feel they have the capacity to reach the goals – otherwise, the goals are unlikely to have motivational power. To meet these conditions, leaders have to be skilled in listening to people's theories about what they can achieve and why, and prepared to subject their own and others' views to critical examination. "There is something deeply unjust about holding people accountable for achieving performance targets when those who set them have little understanding of the tasks involved and even less understanding of the extent to which those who are required to achieve them have the requisite knowledge and skills" (Robinson, 2011, p. 53).

If those three conditions are met, the discrepancy between the goal and the current performance is likely to be motivating and provide a clear focus for staff efforts. Success in reaching a few important goals has a flow-on effect; it creates a sense of self-efficacy, inspiring people to set and reach further goals.

Why principals in schools are likely to have difficulty setting goals

So what is so hard about setting a few clearly articulated academic goals? While it is easy to recognise a good plan when one sees one, it is a lot more difficult to create one. Schools have multiple agendas and taking the time to think clearly and really investigate what is needed to improve takes time, effort and commitment; it also takes considerable knowledge about basic goal setting and planning procedures. Just getting a format that works can take a school many years of experimentation and development, particularly in New Zealand where there is no systematic way of learning from other schools.

Good planning is challenging work. One can easily fall into a compliance mentality and write a plan – 'because you have to' and then get on and do 'what you have always done'. But taking time to identify your real challenge and to work as a school community on how everyone can be part of the solution, takes time and effort. What goes in the plan should be what will be done differently, not what we always do – we don't need to write that down. But to get a different result we have to try some different approaches. We don't know that these new approaches will work; a good plan is our 'theory for improvement' – where we try different things in order to get different results. It is an iterative process; not everything we try will work, but if we know what didn't work, that is a good start to finding out what will. Establishing a few clear goals and targets to which people are committed is a good start to this planning process.

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