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Outperforming Whom? Performance-Prove Goal Orientation
Bart Dietz, PhD, Daan van Knippenberg, PhD, Giles Hirst, PhD, and Simon Lloyd D. Restubog, PhD

Many people are driven to perform and succeed, especially when that drive comes from competition to outperform others. Competition and personal performance can be beneficial traits to people in performance-driven professions. But, how do people alter their drive to compete when they become members of a team? Performance-prove goal orientation defines people’s focus on performance as their ability to outperform and look better than others (Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann, and Wood 2013). The higher a person’s performance-prove goal orientation level is, the greater that person’s performance actually becomes (Jelinek, Ahearne, Mathieu, and Schillewaert, 2006). One key insight in understanding performance-prove goal orientation is that its motivating potential relies on the person identifying different targets for competition. Individuals with high levels of performance-prove goal orientation are constantly comparing themselves to others around them to try and outperform anyone who is competition. This phenomenon can be problematic in a team environment where performance is assessed by individual goals, because the members within the team itself become competition for the person with high performance-prove goal orientation.

In an increasingly team-based sales context, we need to understand how performance-prove goal orientation can potentially benefit performance at the team-level and individual-level. We surmised that shared team identification may lead individuals to include fellow team members as an inclusive “we.” As a result, those other team members would no longer be seen as targets for competition. The sense of “we” also shifts the individual’s priority to team performance and performance-prove goal orientation is then directed at other teams. Therefore, we set out to show that performance-prove orientation can help team performance, but only if the individuals of the team have a shared team identification.

Performance-Prove Goal Orientation and Shared Team Identification

A person’s goal orientation reflects the underlying goals that person is pursuing in achievement situations (Harris, Mowen, and Brown 2015). The goal orientation that we analyzed in our
research is that of performance-prove goal orientation, which is an individual’s motivational disposition to strive to outperform others (Elliot and McGregor 2001). People with high performance-prove goal orientation strive for success and favorable judgments of their performance from managers and peers (Sujan et al., 1994). As a result, social comparison is an inherent component of performance-prove goal orientation because high performance-prove goal oriented individuals need to prove that their performance is superior to the performance of others. The constant comparison of the individual’s work with others’ work creates a level of competition between the individual and those they view they are striving to outperform. In an individual performance-based context, the person can compete against anyone. However, in team-based working environments, we set out to explore the impact of performance-prove goal orientation when a person has both individual goals and team goals.

While performance-prove goal orientation is an individual characteristic, it can also be considered as a factor in the team composition. Mean performance-prove goal orientation is not the shared team state, but rather the mean level of the individual team members’ performance-prove goal orientation levels (Chen et al., 2004). Therefore, teams with high mean performance-prove goal orientation have an average individual disposition to strive for success. While no prior research has been able to establish the effect that mean member performance-prove orientation has on team performance (e.g. LePine, 2005), we proposed that the association between mean performance-prove goal orientation and team performance was contingent upon the team members having a shared team identification.

Social identification, the self-definition of social group membership (Mael and Ashworth 1992), affects the level at which social comparisons are made (Tafjel and Turner 1986). Therefore, to whom high performance-prove goal oriented individuals compare themselves depends upon their own social identifications. We proposed that shared team identification is particularly important because it determines the extent to which team member see other teams as relevant comparison targets for performance competition (as opposed to their fellow team members). If a team has high levels of shared team identification, then the shared sense of oneness, the “we” of the team, may urge comparison with other teams. Conversely, when shared team identification is low and the sense of oneness within the team is absent, other teams are unlikely targets for performance competition.

In essence, we proposed that as self-definition revolves more around a sense of oneness with others in a group, the individual’s performance goals with take a backseat to the prioritized team goals. From these proposals, we predicted and tested that high shared team identification results in team performance is the priority and that when there is lower shared team identification, individual performance-prove goal orientation motivates individual performance. Through our research, we tested our proposals and predictions among sales people who make up a sales team and replicated our findings in tests that involved student groups. Our first study of sales performance in sales team operations yielded clear support for our hypotheses, and led us to
conclude that shared team identification channels the performance-motivating influence of performance-prove goal orientation either toward team performance, in high shared team identification instances, or toward individual performance, in low shared team identification situations.

It is important to note that we were able to replicate the results in the second sample involving student groups. Therefore, we are able to generalize our findings that shared team identification impacts who individuals identify as competition and which performance goals are identified to measure success under the individual performance-prove goal orientation. The more an individual identifies as a member of a team, the more important the team competition and team goals become and the less important the individual goals and individual competition is for the individual.

Real Estate Perspective

Real estate can be a very competitive industry because it is performance- and commission-driven. Performance is what drives an individual’s income, and therefore, performance becomes the most important gauge of an agent’s success. Because real estate is a performance-driven industry, real estate agents may be more inclined to be high performance-prove goal-oriented individuals. Therefore, understanding the impacts that performance-prove goal orientation can have on individual performance, as well as team performance, can be beneficial for real estate agents and their leaders, especially as real estate companies shift towards more team-oriented sales structures.

If a real estate firm wants to ensure that individual performance remains the focus for success, then the firm is better off avoiding team structures, or creating the structures in ways that affirm the importance of “I” performance as opposed to “we” performance. However, if a real estate firm wants to leverage team structures and avoid intra-team competition, the teams should be formed in ways that focus on recognizing the team’s performance above the individual members of the team’s performance. This could be accomplished through team commissions that may be split equally or otherwise incentivizing and rewarding an individual’s shared team identification. It is only through building a strong sense of shared team identification that teams can truly shift the competition from other team members to other teams. This is especially important in the performance-driven real estate industry because, as our research suggests, if the individual agents on the team don’t have a strong sense of belonging to the team, then they will always prioritize
individual performance and goals over team performance and goals and continue to view other agents as competition, even if those agents are teammates.

When the priority is to optimize the performance of individuals, our results indicate that managers ought to organize people high on performance-prove goal orientation in teams with weak shared team identification. For a real estate firm, where agents are gauged more on individual sales performance, teams with low levels of shared team identification could actually create greater competition and drive to improve individual agent performance. However, real estate firms should be wary of lone-wolf type mentalities that turn that constructive intra-office competition into aggressive and destructive tactics.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Bart Dietz earned his PhD and MSc. degrees from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. His research focuses on the management of salespeople. His articles have been published in *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. His research has been covered by Dutch media and magazines for professionals. He has served as an ad-hoc reviewer for *Journal of Marketing*, and he is on the Editorial Board of *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*. Bart teaches HR to undergraduates, master students and business professionals. He consulted and presented for companies such as Manpower, Heineken, Ernst & Young, Cendris, and RET.

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Dr. Giles Hirst joined the ANU College of Business and Economics as the Inaugural Chair of Leadership within the Research School of Management. His leadership development programs help leaders use their unique strengths, connect with their purpose and through this deliver greater impact. Independent evaluations of this work have demonstrated significant cultural and performance benefits of these programs.

Prior to joining ANU, Giles was Associate Professor within the Department of Management at Monash University, where he contributed significantly to their research and teaching programs over the last decade, and was awarded four Vice Chancellors awards for unit excellence. He received his PhD in Management at the University of Melbourne, has worked in management consulting and in the UK at the Aston Business School.

Giles is also a leading researcher in the areas of creativity, innovation and social and organizational networks, and has been awarded over a million dollars in government ARC grants and industry funding. He has published in the top management journals including *The Academy of Management Journal*, *The Journal of Applied Psychology* and *The Leadership Quarterly* as well as being invited to take part in a renowned scholars symposium at the Academy of Management conference.

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His research focuses on antecedents and maintenance of psychological contracts, measurement and prediction of destructive leadership and dysfunctional work behaviors, and barriers and supports for career development. He has won the best paper (micro/OB research) in *Group & Organizational Management* and best paper awards at the Annual Conference of the US Academy of Management (AoM, Social Issues in Management Division, 2011; Organizational Development and Change Division, 2007) and the Australian Industrial/Organizational Psychology Conference (2011) and was a 2012 and 2013 Best Paper Finalist in the AoM - Managerial and Organizational Cognitions and Careers Divisions. In terms of teaching, he was a recipient of the ANU Student Award for Top Supervisors and the ANU College of Business & Economics Award for Excellence in Research Supervision.