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Improving With Age

A Review of

Motives and Goals in Groups

by Alvin Zander

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Reviewed by

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Anyone who is interested in group performance—in particular, that crucial link between the goals set by individuals and those set by groups—should review Alvin Zander's recently reprinted monograph *Motives and Goals in Groups*. The book summarizes experimental and correlational studies carried out by Zander and his colleagues in the 1960s, during the heyday of group research in social psychology. The book may be a third of a century old, but Zander's theory, methods, and findings are as trenchant as ever. The work, which is grounded in level-of-aspiration theory, explains how group members set and revise goals for their groups. Zander's fundamental premise: People achieve more when they have clear goals in mind and are provided feedback about their progress toward those goals. Across a dozen studies he documents a wide variety of performance-impacting phenomena: how members of newly formed groups use individual expectations to develop group goals; the fundamental tension between the selfish desire for personal success and the more collectivistic desire for group success; the self-serving tendency for group members to claim more than their fair share of the credit for group successes; sources of satisfaction that derive from working in a group rather than solo; and the impact of standards imposed by authorities on group members' goals. Researchers have added substantially to our understanding of group performance in the years since *Motives and Goals in Groups* was first published, but Zander's studies presaged contemporary interest in teamwork, group performance, and goal-setting.

Motives and Goals in Groups is a classic research monograph. Like Newcomb's (1961) *The Acquaintance Process* and Festinger's (1957) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Zander illustrates how theory-based research should be conceived, designed, and carried out experimentally and nonexperimentally. Through cautious experimentation he determines how individuals select goals for their groups and make revisions to these goals based on feedback of group success or failure. He then introduces additional factors into the performance setting, such as the performance of rival groups and the expectations of external observers, to determine how groups calibrate their goals in response to each new element. Furthermore, he examines the goal-setting activities of naturally occurring groups, such as production teams and governing boards of foundations, and makes explicit the usefulness of his theoretical analyses for those interested in application. Thus, Zander provides both basic and applied groups researchers a blueprint for the scientific investigation of how groups set and pursue goals.

But *Motives and Goals in Groups* is not just a classic, for it provides answers to questions about group performance still being asked today. Everyone suspects that the secret to organizational success lies in managing groups effectively, and a flood of texts, monographs, popular press books, and websites offers insights and recommendations for harnessing the potential performance and productivity power of groups. Although many contemporary treatments of group performance offer quick fixes for the problems that working groups face, Zander's insights are backed up by theory and data. The insights served up by today's experts pale in comparison to Zander's.

References

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Newcomb, T. M. (1961). *The acquaintance process*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Alvin Zander is emeritus director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). Zander is author of *Making Groups Effective* (2nd ed.), *Making Boards Effective: The Dynamics of Nonprofit Governing Boards*, and *Effective Social Action by Community Groups* and is coeditor, with D. Cartwright, of *Group Dynamics Theory and Research* (3rd ed.).

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