# Cognitive theories

Lesson 6.1.2 | Organisational psychology

## Core ideas

Cognitive theories explain motivation through beliefs, expectations and decisions rather than only through needs or rewards.

Latham and Locke's goal-setting theory argues that clear, challenging goals can improve performance when workers are committed and receive useful feedback.

Goal-setting principles include clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback and task complexity.

SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, so workers know exactly what success should look like.

Vroom's VIE theory explains motivation through expectancy, instrumentality and valence.

Cognitive theories are useful because they apply to everyday work planning, but they can be too rational if they ignore emotion, culture, habit or unequal access to rewards.

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## Key terms

**Goal-setting theory:** A theory that clear and challenging goals can improve motivation and performance.

**Goal clarity:** How specific and understandable a goal is.

**Goal commitment:** How strongly a worker accepts and wants to reach a goal.

**Feedback:** Information about progress or performance.

**SMART goal:** A goal that is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound.

**Expectancy:** Belief that effort will lead to good performance.

**Instrumentality:** Belief that good performance will lead to a valued outcome.

**Valence:** How much a worker values the outcome or reward.

## Further detail and evidence

**Goal-setting principles:** clarity makes the target understandable; challenge requires meaningful effort; commitment makes it personally accepted; feedback shows progress; task complexity requires suitable time, resources and subgoals. A difficult target without skills/support may reduce effectiveness.

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SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. For example, completing an agreed number of accurately checked records by the end of a week specifies an outcome and deadline; "work harder" does not.

**Vroom's VIE:** expectancy is the belief that effort can produce the required performance; instrumentality is the belief that performance leads to an outcome; valence is the value of that outcome. Motivation depends on all three, often represented as a multiplicative relationship: one missing link can undermine effort.

## Applying the ideas

An attractive bonus has high valence, but motivation can remain low if the worker lacks training (low expectancy) or believes rewards are allocated unfairly (low instrumentality). A useful response targets the weak link, rather than only increasing the bonus. Feedback can show whether performance is approaching a goal.

## Evaluation and connections

Cognitive accounts recognise interpretation and agency. They can oversimplify if they treat all choices as calculated or assume one valued reward. Goals can narrow attention and encourage quantity at the expense of quality. Evaluate cultural values, task complexity, fairness, wellbeing and whether performance is under the worker's control.