

Psychologist: Achievement goals can be shaped by environment

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A new study by Stanford psychologist Paul O'Keefe suggests that the culture of our learning and working environments can have long-term effects on our goals and motivation.

Think about the ideal student. He or she focuses on learning, not grades;

improvement, not appearances; [competency](#), not competition. This person wants to understand and grow, not just prove how smart he or she is.

So how is that mindset – which tends to lead to high levels of engagement and performance, resiliency in the face of failure and a thirst for knowledge – fostered and maintained?

A new [study](#) by Stanford psychologist Paul O'Keefe, Adar Ben-Eliyahu of the University of Pittsburgh and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia of Duke University suggests that the way we design our working and learning environments can change people's [motivation](#) for achieving important tasks.

The study says being in an environment that emphasizes learning for learning's sake will dampen concerns about outperforming others and enhance intrinsic motivation even after one returns to a culture that places more value on demonstrating skills than developing them.

"The study suggests that, once this goal orientation has been fostered and reinforced, the adaptive patterns of motivation endure," said O'Keefe, a postdoctoral fellow. "It suggests that this goal orientation can survive in a variety of different climates."

Goal orientation is the term [psychologists](#) use to explain the [mindset](#) applied to achievement-related activities.

People tend to adopt goal orientations depending on the situation or environment, but there can also be some stability in these orientations – simply the way one naturally approaches work and learning.

Generally, there are two types of goal orientations people adopt: mastery and performance.

Mastery orientation is described as a focus on learning and improvement – that ideal student. Performance orientation refers to a focus on demonstrating competence relative to others – trying to appear smart or avoid looking stupid, for example.

Psychologists tend to agree that a mastery orientation is highly adaptive and carries the most positive qualities, including perseverance, seeking out challenges and a desire to learn.

A performance orientation can also yield positive outcomes – good grades and job promotions, for example – but at a detrimental cost, some psychologists say.

People who are focused on outperforming others and looking smart tend to be more anxious and to worry more.

O'Keefe and his co-authors attempted to determine if there are long-term effects to being exposed to a mastery-oriented environment.

"We know a mastery environment is great. We know mastery [goals](#) are great. Study after study shows this," O'Keefe said. "So what we wanted to examine was how a purely mastery-oriented environment affected goal orientations and whether these changes would endure when people returned to less ideal learning environments."

To find out, the researchers turned to teenagers.

Over a nine-month period, the psychologists tested a group of eighth- to 10th-grade students three times by asking them to fill out surveys to assess the degree to which they held different goal orientations.

The first survey was taken before summer break while the students were in school – traditionally a performance-oriented environment. The

second was taken while they studied at a mastery-oriented summer enrichment program. The third was taken six months after the program, while the students were back in their regular schools.

To assess a mastery orientation, the survey asked the students to rate their level of agreement with statements like, "It's important to me that I learn a lot of new concepts in science." To assess performance orientations, it asked students to rate statements including, "One of my goals is to show others that I'm good at science."

"We could see how for each individual their endorsements of these statements changed over time and how their environment changed their endorsement of these goal orientations," O'Keefe said.

What the researchers found was that during the summer program, the ratings on performance-oriented statements went down and mastery went up – predictably, O'Keefe said.

But what surprised researchers was that when the students left the mastery environment of the summer program, the levels at which they rated statements assessing mastery remained high six months later – even though they had returned to a performance-oriented environment.

"So this seems to suggest there is an enduring effect with exposure to mastery-oriented environments," O'Keefe said. "People are maintaining these adaptive motivational patterns even when they're in a different environment that doesn't readily support a mastery orientation."

O'Keefe said more research is needed to determine why this happens. Still, he says, there are things employers and educators can do to encourage a more mastery-oriented environment and long-term learning and interest.

He said teachers or leaders could allow students or team members to have some choice in what they're doing, allowing more autonomy, rather than giving orders or micromanaging. Leaders also can structure environments that encourage intellectual risks, rather than punish mistakes. Reducing social comparison and competition can also foster mastery and reduce performance-goal orientations.

"We want to create ideal students, employees and team members. We want people to be doing what they're doing because they love it," O'Keefe said. "We realize this isn't how our society is structured, so any extent to which we can bolster people's mastery orientation, we think is a giant step in the right direction."

The study, conducted at Duke University under Linnenbrink-Garcia's leadership, appears online in the journal *Motivation and Emotion*. It is expected to be in print in an upcoming volume.

Provided by Stanford University

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