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Go with Plan A: Backup Plans Help the Powerful but Distract the Powerless

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Abstract

Backup plans represent a safety net that can help ensure goal attainment. However, managing backup plans during goal pursuit can also deflect attention away from the initial plan. We examined how individuals' sense of power, which is said to facilitate goal pursuit, affects the extent to which one gets distracted by backup plans. Results from four studies showed that when a backup plan was activated, greater sense of power was associated with lower self-reported distraction and better performance. Studies 2 and 3 further revealed mediating effects of distraction between sense of power and performance. Greater sense of power was associated with less distraction, which in turn was related to better performance. Our findings suggest that when pursuing goals, individuals experiencing high power may be better at allocating their limited cognitive resources to the initial plan.