“Missing the Target; Hitting the Point”

Mention numerical targets and you tend to get one of three reactions:

1. “Targets are necessary to drive performance”.

2. “Targets are bad because they cause dysfunctional behaviour”.

3. “Targets are risky, but okay if used with caution”.

I’ll nail my colours to the mast from the outset - I’m firmly in Camp Two. The first statement is just plain wrong; the third appears to be stranded in no-man’s land.

My case against numerical targets is based on experience, research and evidence. In contrast, most of the defences of targets lack credible supporting evidence and are either characterised by stoic denial of well-documented consequences, or based on a simple misunderstanding of what numerical targets actually are.

If you’re in the latter category, then we can get this over with quickly and painlessly, because as Belinda Carlisle sang in the 1980’s, “We want the same thing.” It’s probably just a terminology issue and we can agree about effective performance management principles, knowing we’re not that far apart in our thinking after all.

However, if you’re part of the ‘targets are necessary despite the evidence’ brigade, then this might hurt a bit.

Measures Not Targets

My position on targets can be summed up by two simple points:

1. All numerical targets are arbitrary.

2. No numerical target is immune from causing dysfunctional behaviour.

We’ll explore these two points soon, but first I want to resolve the use of language. ‘Numerical targets’, ‘measures’ and ‘priorities’ are three different things, but the words and concepts are often conflated. This causes people to assume targets are necessary, when they are actually thinking about one of the other two things.

Priorities are essential, because we need to ensure activity is focused. Priorities set direction and tell people what’s important. So, if tackling house burglaries is a force priority, that’s great because everyone knows what’s expected. BUT they’re not numerical targets! The target is the bit at the end, invented in someone’s head that states, “…by 23%”, or whatever.

Despite this, I still hear people saying things like, “We need targets for house burglaries because targets set direction and ambition”. No, the clearly-articulated priority of ‘tackling house burglaries’ sets direction and ambition – the target is irrelevant.

Next, we come to perhaps the greatest terminology mix-up in the history of performance management – ‘targets’ vs ‘measures’. One of the most common phrases I hear trotted out is, “We need targets so we can measure performance”. No, you don’t! MEASURES measure
performance – the clue is in the name. Targets don’t measure anything – they are just those random aspirational numbers, invented in someone’s head that state, “…by 23%”, remember?

Measures are absolutely critical, because without measuring the right things in the right way, it’s impossible to understand performance. Measures are just a source of information that can help us to make informed decisions. So for house burglaries, for instance, we could measure:

- The burglary rate.
- Detected burglaries.
- Response times to burglaries.
- Factors that led to burglaries being detected (e.g. forensic hit / caught in the act / CCTV / house-to-house enquiries).

These are just some examples of measures that are directly linked to the priority of tackling house burglaries. In addition, we can utilise hotspot mapping, predictive analysis, intelligence submissions, and so on. Taken together, this wealth of information provides a starting point for understanding the burglary picture.

So once again, numerical targets are irrelevant. Measures tell us about performance perfectly well – targets are random numbers invented in people’s heads. Therefore, I’d argue effective performance management systems require priorities and measures, but not numerical targets. If you already understand this concept and can differentiate between the three, then you probably don’t need to read the rest of this article.

**Numerical Targets are Arbitrary**

Right, let’s get straight to the point. Numerical targets are arbitrary because there is no known scientific method for setting them. No matter how in-depth the data analysis that establishes the range, trajectory, or average rate of prior performance, the actual adjustment to produce the target is always arbitrary.

Consequently, you see targets for policing activity, such as these:

- Reduce crime by 3%.
- Detect 18% of burglaries.
- Conduct 243,206.3 stop and searches. (The decimal point is not a typo).

These targets are contrived by taking a baseline (usually simplistically derived from the previous year’s data), then metaphorically sticking one’s finger in the air and designating a random number as the target. Alternatively, some people multiply an arbitrary percentage against the baseline to produce the target. Other approaches involve ‘consultation’, which simply involves a group of people concocting targets, rather than just one or two individuals.

These approaches are fundamentally flawed, because they ignore important statistical considerations. Without getting into the heavy stuff, every data set exhibits normal (and totally random) variation within a predictable range. Look at the chart overleaf.
Figure 1. Example of a statistical process control (SPC) chart

The numbers and date increments have been omitted from this example to keep it simple, plus I don’t have enough space here to explain how the lines are determined - just trust me that the zig-zags are indicative of random variation. This means it is unlikely there is an underlying identifiable cause for the differences observed. When the data points stay within the dashed lines (‘control limits’) and do not exhibit specified patterns, then the process can be described as ‘stable’. Therefore, unless there is a sudden shock or change in system conditions, the data will continue to populate anywhere within this range.

Let’s say the chart related to response times, with the lower control limit at the 5 minute mark and the upper control limit at 15 minutes. This tells us that if the type and frequency of demand remains constant, and we deploy the same resources from the same location, then officers will predictably arrive at emergencies at any point between 5 and 15 minutes. Consequently, there is no merit in setting a target (e.g. 10 minutes), because officers will continue to arrive between 5 and 15 minutes. This is because setting a target anywhere in a range of data ignores variation, meaning sometimes it will be hit and other times it won’t, purely due to randomness. Similarly, if a target is set outside the expected range (e.g. at 4 minutes), then it cannot routinely be achieved under current system conditions.

This latter point illustrates why ‘stretch targets’ are particularly inappropriate; targets do not provide a method or capacity for achieving the objective of quicker response times. If demand and resources remain constant, then system conditions dictate the range within which officers will arrive. Response time targets are therefore arbitrary and irrelevant; when responding to emergencies, the ambition should be to deploy the appropriate resource to attend as quickly and safely as possible, then resolve the issue upon arrival.

Reviewing SPC data helps leaders understand demand and make informed decisions about how to improve. Altering system conditions (e.g. amount or location of resources on duty at particular times) is what influences performance. Numerical targets, on the other hand, are incapable of improving the system; they are unnecessary and impotent in this context.
The desire for faster response times should therefore result in careful analysis and evidence-based improvements, not simply expecting officers to arrive more quickly. Furthermore, the argument that failure to hit a target acts as a useful trigger for initiating remedial action is misguided because:

a) The judgment is made against an arbitrary ‘good’ / ‘bad’ dividing line.
b) The target disregards variation and imparts nothing about the capability of the system.
c) If leaders use contextualised data to understand performance, then informed decisions can be made based on actual evidence instead.

Additionally, whilst it may be feasible to predict future performance within a range, it is impossible to state precisely where performance will be at some future point. For example, if the detection rate was steadily increasing it may be possible to predict there will be between approximately 2,000 and 2,600 offences detected in a year’s time, but it would be impossible to state exactly how many (e.g. 2,550 detected offences).

For these reasons, targets such as ‘detect 18% of offences’ violate established statistical principles. Managers would require a crystal ball to know if this precise amount was achievable. Furthermore, such targets inadvertently suggest there is no ambition to detect the other 82% of offences - surely this isn’t the case, but it calls into question why the stated ambition is not to detect as many offences as possible.

The bottom line is this - numerical targets are fundamentally incompatible with variation; there is no way round this and therefore all numerical targets are arbitrary.

**Targets and Behavioural Change**

The basic assumption underpinning targets is that they change behaviour. I agree – targets are explicitly intended to exert influence, so they’re certainly not neutral. Proponents believe targets encourage pro-organisational behaviour, whereas I warn of highly predictable gaming and dysfunction. Whilst not claiming that every single person subject to a target will always engage in dysfunctional behaviour, I’d suggest it’d be naïve to ignore the risks, or deny that targets are consistently responsible for triggering adverse consequences.

The evidence is overwhelming - introduce numerical targets into performance frameworks and people will engage in gaming, cheating and other subterfuge in order to hit the targets. They are not necessarily ‘bad apples’ either, as otherwise good people also engage in these behaviours.

Look at the Public Administration Select Committee’s 2014 report into misreporting of crime statistics by police forces; it categorically warns targets, “…tend to affect attitudes, erode data quality and to distort individual and institutional behaviour and priorities”. (p.31) Consequently, the Committee issued the following strongly-worded recommendation:

“The Home Office, which claims credit for abolishing national numerical targets, should make clear in its guidance to PCCs that they should not set performance targets based on Police Recorded Crime data as this tends to distort recording practices and to create perverse incentives to misrecord crime. The evidence for this is incontrovertible. In the meantime, we deprecate such target setting in the strongest possible terms”.

(p.52)
Given this and other high profile warnings, along with the vast array of cross-sectorial evidence regarding the highly predictable consequences of target-setting, I find it astounding that these very real dangers are still ignored by some. For me, there is no ‘use with caution’ when it comes to numerical targets.

Then there’s something about motivation. Target-setters believe targets are necessary to make people work hard, which I think is pretty insulting, particularly in the public services context. I, for one, joined the police to help people, catch criminals and protect the vulnerable. If an officer was investigating five burglaries, what is the point of a 20% detection target? That’s like saying, “Don’t bother with four of those offences”. How is that better than aiming to solve as many as you possibly can?

Similarly, who puts 13% effort into pursuing a stolen car because the detection target for vehicle crime happens to be 13%? What about targets for conducting, say, 456 patrols? Why 456? Why is 455 not enough and 457 too many? What about quality? If targets are really needed to drive performance, what prompts the 457th patrol? Also, what motivates officers to do a good job in areas of policing that are too complex to set simplistic targets for (e.g. Public Protection)?

Even the world’s foremost proponents of numerical targets, Professors Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, who have spent decades developing Goal-Setting Theory, acknowledge there are serious limitations. Whilst experiments have shown individuals subject to targets increase output for simple, repetitive tasks, the consensus is numerical targets are unsuitable in complex systems (such as policing).

This is partly because targets encourage unhealthy internalised competition, resulting in a debilitating condition known as sub-optimisation. This occurs where individuals, teams or departments focus on targets at the expense of each other, the overall system and / or other important activities not subject to targets. Or to put it another way, targets do indeed set direction – in the direction of the targets.

Furthermore, Locke and Latham accept that targets can and do cause dysfunctional behaviour, damage morale, and impair performance; plus they warn targets are particularly inappropriate for situations where individuals don’t have total control over their performance. (Crime reduction targets spring to mind here). If these guys acknowledge the dangers of target-driven performance management, I think we should all listen.

**Time to Decide**

Target-setters insist unintended consequences aren’t actually due to the targets, but the way they’re implemented. I disagree. As with league tables, if target-driven performance management is aggressively enforced, then it stands to reason that adverse consequences will be magnified. However, simply exonerating the targets is like saying, “It’s not the nails that caused the tyre to go flat – it’s the way the nails were inserted into it”. (Or they were the ‘wrong sort’ of nails, or there were too many / too few nails etc.)

And if you’re one of those people who believes some targets must be okay, then ask yourself ‘which ones?’ and ‘why?’ What makes your preferred targets unlikely to cause dysfunctional behaviour, like those other targets do? And aren’t they arbitrary anyway - why not just aim for 100% instead? If you could solve five burglaries, you would.
There is something innately toxic about the targets themselves that significantly raises the risk of dysfunction. Again, during my ongoing PhD research, I conducted experimental psychometric tests with over 4,000 officers and found consistently that the use of numerical targets leads to unfounded assumptions about performance and drives adverse behavioural responses.

In the absence of cultural or organisational pressures, this strongly indicates the use of numerical targets leads to predictable adversity; therefore I would suggest any perceived benefits are outweighed by the dangers. So why gamble? For me, there is no such thing as ‘responsible’ or ‘positive’ use of numerical targets in police performance frameworks.

In summary:

1. Numerical targets are arbitrary and therefore inherently illegitimate.

2. Numerical targets do not provide a method or capacity to improve performance.

3. Dysfunctional behaviour is a highly predictable consequence of target-driven performance management.

Therefore, I argue there is a strong case to abandon targets and use contextualised data instead. Being clear about priorities and using the right measures in the right way informs decision making, promotes learning, and provides the insight necessary to use performance information intelligently. What’s not to like about that, seriously?

Having no targets does not mean no performance management. Having no targets does not mean no accountability. Having no targets does not mean no ambition.

Let numerical targets go.

Simon Guilfoyle