

LESSONS ABOUT TARGETS

1. Targets come with baggage (unless one is freely setting one's own). Targets are not innocent and neutral.
2. Targets carry messages from the target setter of where power lies.
3. Operators' success or failure to meet targets carries rewards or punishments, even if only reputational or alleviation of further pressure.
4. Targets depend on unacknowledged incentives that incline behaviour or decisions in a particular direction.
5. Targets are intended to produce numbers that would not otherwise be achieved by the system alone.
6. Sometimes incentives to bias decisions and performance may be explicit and include payments or punishments.
7. Targets shift staff's focus onto hitting the target instead of concentrating on the subtle realities of the subject that the target numerically represents.
8. Targets attempt to force results that people would not otherwise achieve (quantitative or qualitative).
9. Targets bias decisions away from how those decisions or behaviour would otherwise objectively and professionally be arrived at.
10. Targets do not recognise that a working system has its own inherent process and results, which targets try to over-ride.
11. Providing distance between the policy setter of the target and those charged with meeting the target reduces the need for human commitment to the object of that target or to the ethos of the target setter.
12. Subcontracting the fulfilment of the target to an agency makes it easier for the policy setter to be insulated from bad outcomes (similar to pilots dropping bombs from high-altitude aircraft).
13. The terms of contracted-out fulfilment for meeting targets make it easier for clients to impose more demanding targets than they would on their own staff (you don't have to meet and convince those people doing the work).
14. Targets frequently assume a greater ability to predict and manage a desired outcome than is realistic. Targets are often politically arrived at aspirations, wishes and guesses. Targets are often unmet.
15. Notwithstanding the above, it may be difficult to convince people of the strength of your motives, conviction and efforts without announcing a target, however flawed the target or the process.
16. A declared target (however meaningless and unrealisable) will help win support and votes for your cause, as though the target can be assumed to be met merely by stating it.

