Intelligent Policing

How Systems Thinking Methods Eclipse Conventional Management Practice

PREVIEW: Chapter 6 - Targets

Simon Guilfoyle

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CHAPTER SIX

Targets and Their Unintended Consequences

In recent years there has been a discernible shift in the public's opinion of targets. With well-publicised examples of how they drive the wrong sorts of behaviour and generate unnecessary bureaucracy,[1] it seemed that target-driven performance management was also beginning to fall out of favour with Government officials and senior policy makers. Gradually, the extensive raft of public sector targets that had proliferated during the darkest days of New Public Management (NPM) appeared to ebb slightly. Some of them even disappeared completely.

In police management meetings, targets were seldom mentioned and were less overt in performance documents. Senior managers spoke openly about the drawbacks of target-driven performance management and, instead, encouraged officers to 'do the right thing'. For a while it seemed as though the policing world was becoming a happier, target-free place.

But don't be fooled. Targets have not gone away.

What This Isn't About

I want to assure you that this is not going to be a general moan about performance management or measurement. The subject under scrutiny here is purely *targets*. I believe that both priorities and measures are important features of an effective performance management system.

Priorities are (or at least *should be*) intrinsically linked to purpose. If we don't understand what the organisational purpose is, we cannot define priorities and thereby ensure that effort is focused in the right areas. Evidence-based prioritisation maximises the effectiveness of operational responses.

Measures are also a critical component of an effective performance management system. Once purpose-derived priorities have been identified,

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1   A particularly powerful example was the scandal over quality of care at Stafford General Hospital. A series of inquiries found that targets had contributed to unnecessary deaths amongst patients. See: Alberti (2009); Colin-Thomé (2009); Healthcare Commission (2009)

the next stage in understanding the system is to use measures to inform method. This should involve intelligently interpreting data drawn from the measures, using approaches such as SPC. The result is that knowledge is gained, enabling management to work on improving the system, and so the virtuous cycle continues. There is absolutely no argument against priorities or measures, as long as they are the right ones. It is *targets* that are the problem.

The Bad Old Days

Now that that disclaimer is out of the way, let's begin by looking at how the NPM reforms spawned targets and embedded them in the psyche of public sector organisations. During the height of what became known as New Labour's 'Targets and Terror'[2] regime of the late 1990s and early 2000s, targets were everywhere; overt, bold, demanding, all-powerful. Following the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review, 366 national Public Service Agreement targets (PSAs)[3] were introduced, which included further tiers of 600 additional performance targets.[4] These dominated the public sector over the next few years and characterised the intrusive, interventionist mode of government control over the sector.

Targets set at the national level (such as PSAs) had the propensity to multiply exponentially as they descended through various levels and sub-categories on their way to the frontline. Broad, high level objectives routinely mutated into a tangle of confusing, contradictory targets at the operational level.[5] For example, one study produced evidence that national PSAs were converted to '…an average of 26 indicators per PSA' at the local level.[6]

During this period, no part of the public sector escaped the imposition of targets. In 2001, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) was inaugurated to monitor and drive performance in around twenty key public sector targets.[7] Headed by Michael Barber, the PMDU reported directly to the Prime Minister, and was responsible for scrutinising public

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2   'Targets and Terror' was a phrase originally associated with the Soviet regime of the 1930s, but was famously likened to the recent targets regime in the NHS by Bevan and Hood (2006) pp.517-538
3   See: James (2004) pp.397-419; Micheli and Neely (2010) pp.592-600
4   See: Chief Secretary to the Treasury. (1998a); Chief Secretary to the Treasury. (1998b)
5   See for example: Hood (2006) pp.515-521; Hood and Dixon (2010) pp.281-298; Jackson (2011) pp.13-26
6   Micheli and Neely (2010) p.597
7   Hood and Dixon (2010) pp.281-298

service performance against numerical targets and standards, publishing comparative data, and holding managers personally to account. Barber labeled the approach, 'Deliverology'.[8]

The police service certainly received its share of attention from the target-mongers. In 2002, the Police Reform Act empowered the Home Secretary to set annual performance targets for the police.[9] Forces were subsequently beholden to a range of numerical targets largely relating to the reduction and detection of crime, but also in a broad range of other areas, such as budgets and attendance levels. National targets were supplemented by force-level targets, which were supplemented by local targets, which were supplemented by team targets, which were sometimes then supplemented by individual targets. High level objectives would be published in force-level and local policing plans, and the exact numerical targets would look something like the following list, taken from an actual local policing plan:

- Reduce crime by at least 2%
- Detect at least 28% of offences
- Obtain at least 63 football banning orders
- At least 90% of non-emergency calls to be answered within 40 seconds
- At least 18% of police officers promoted to be female
- Detect at least 147 offensive weapon offences
- Detect at least 7% of graffiti offences
- Achieve at least 14.5 detections per officer.[10]

How did they come up with these numbers? No one knows.

When is a Target Not a Target?

The official line during the last few years has been that reliance on numerical targets is waning and there is a greater emphasis on officer discretion and common sense. Nevertheless, this apparent quiet retreat is not as encouraging as it might first appear to the untrained eye.

A couple of 'distraction techniques' have emerged, which appear to have been designed to shunt targets conveniently out of the spotlight whilst absolutely retaining them. Both methods are equally cunning, yet easy to spot once you know what you're looking for. They are:

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8   Crace (2007)
9   Home Office (2002) Chapter 30
10   British Transport Police (2008)

1. Have fewer targets

2. Call targets something else.

The first technique is actually nothing more than simply doing less of the wrong thing. This sophisticated approach to hiding targets involves publicly decrying the multitude of numerical targets that the police have previously been subjected to, in favour of installing fewer targets; perhaps just one. Two Home Secretaries have used this method in recent years; the first occasion being when Labour's 'single confidence measure', was introduced following the 2008 Policing Green Paper. The then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, announced, "*…in future there will only be a single top-down target for police forces – on improving public confidence.*"[11] This target was subsequently rescinded in June 2010 by the Conservative Home Secretary, Theresa May, who replaced it with another single top-down target – 'to reduce crime'. During a speech in which she heavily criticised centralised targets, May declared:

> *"In scrapping the confidence target and the policing pledge, I couldn't be any clearer about your mission: it isn't a 30-point plan; it is to cut crime. No more, and no less".*[12]

Notwithstanding the fact that the purpose of the police service is not *only* to increase confidence or reduce crime (what about protecting vulnerable people, dealing with fatal road traffic collisions, delivering death messages in the middle of the night, searching for lost children, guarding murder scenes, mounting counter-terrorism operations, arbitrating in neighbour disputes, policing large demonstrations and football matches, providing security for Home Secretaries during official engagements, etc?), there are a couple of basic flaws in these attempts at creating a workable single target:

- Each of these 'single top-down targets' holds the police unilaterally responsible for something that is not totally within the service's ability to control i.e. public confidence can be affected by past experiences, the influence of the media, as well as varying degrees of understanding and expectations from the public about what the

11   Home Office (2008b)
12   Greenwood (2010)

police can or should deal with. Crime reduction, as we have seen, is also affected by numerous external factors such as substance abuse, economic drivers, and so on.

- It is pure fantasy to believe that such a broad aspiration 'to reduce crime' will ever be permitted to exist without tiers of numerical targets propping them up. If 'to reduce crime' is now the single national target, then the obvious question to ask is, by how much? Obviously, this is impossible to predict, much less set a hard numerical target for, but it won't stop it from happening.

The second technique to keep the word 'targets' off the public menu is to simply camouflage them as something else: 'milestones'[13] or 'headline goals',[14] for example.

The systematic misrepresentation of public sector targets applies to other agencies as well. I recently had cause to write to the Department of Health, following treatment in the Accident and Emergency (A&E) department of my local hospital. As ever, the people who work there seemed to be doing their best to help me, but just before four hours had elapsed I found myself at the centre of a flurry of activity and admitted to a ward for about an hour whilst an assessment was carried out. The doctor informed me that the only reason the assessment had been carried out on the ward rather than in the A&E department was because they "needed to get me out of there due to the four hour target".

When I subsequently raised concerns about this target with the Department of Health (DoH) and pointed out the dysfunctional behaviour it had caused, they pointed me in the direction of their shiny new range of 'clinical quality indicators', which, they claimed, were nothing like targets. I researched DoH guidance and found the DoH's four hour 'non-target' under the header of a 'performance management trigger'. It defines a time threshold for patients to be admitted, transferred or discharged from A&E, and reads as follows:

> A 95th percentile wait above 4 hours for admitted patients and with the same threshold for non-admitted.[15]

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13   Collins (2011)
14   Brindle (2012)
15   Department of Health (2010)

Further into the guidance document I found this ominous little gem lurking:

A 95th percentile wait above four hours may trigger intervention…[16]

So…it's a 'clinical quality indicator' and not a target. Sounds like a target to me. Efforts at re-branding numerical targets by giving them a different name do not fool everyone; indeed some official documentation inadvertently leaves pretty blatant clues about the origins of 'milestones' *et al* and their similarity to traditional numerical targets. Look closely at the wording of another actual strategic policing plan:

The plan identifies a number of strategic priorities, which are linked to actions and milestones that ensure effective delivery. Measurement of progress will be through key performance indicators with challenging targets".[17]

Targets never went away. Although they may not officially exist anymore, they are so entrenched in police performance management culture that very few senior managers seem to be able to let go of them. In many cases, it is not just senior managers that cling to the target culture, but frontline supervisors as well. This is a terrible shame, and signifies the extent to which the rot has set in. Apart from the impossibility of scientifically setting a numerical target, every single numerical target brings with it a range of unpalatable side effects.

Targets Always Change Behaviour

Target-driven performance management always affects behaviour. This is evidenced by research and underpinned by theory, and we shall examine this first before looking at some real life examples. In a seminal paper on the effect of performance targets, Professors Gwyn Bevan of the London School of Economics and Christopher Hood of Oxford University argue:

Governance by targets rests on the assumption that targets change the behaviour of individuals and organisations.[18]

Supporters of target-driven performance management hope and believe that targets will change people's behaviour for the better, focusing efforts

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16   *ibid* p.22
17   West Midlands Police Authority. (2008a)
18   Bevan and Hood (2006) pp.517-538

on organisational objectives and thereby achieving results. My experience is that a behaviour change is indeed inevitable, although the type of behaviour that results is rarely conducive to these aspirations. Goodhart's eponymous Law warns:

> Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes.[19]

In other words, targets destabilise those processes subject to targets. Destabilise the processes and the whole system will destabilise. Donald Wheeler is more specific about the likely effects of target-driven performance management, suggesting that when people are pressured to meet a target one (or more) of three reactions ensue:

1. They work to improve the system

2. They distort the system

3. They distort the data.[20]

Supporters of target-driven performance management would anticipate that the first outcome is the most likely, but what management often fails to appreciate is that no matter how desperately workers want to improve the system and do the right thing for the service user, their influence is limited. It is management that owns the lion's share of the responsibility and capability to improve the system.

The reality is that when individuals are put under pressure to meet targets anything can (and does) happen. This does not mean that those who subvert the system are necessarily bad people; they are just trying to survive in a hostile environment – an environment where management inflicts unrealistic expectations upon them. I argue that targets inevitably promote perverse incentives and behaviours and the net result is that costs increase, morale is adversely affected, service delivery is sub-optimised and the overall system is damaged. This is not a mere possibility. It is not a threat. It is a *guarantee*.

This section will examine why these types of behaviours occur, and why the consequences are an absolute cast-iron certainty.

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19   Goodhart (1975)
20   Wheeler (2000) p.20

Gaming

The types of behaviour that result from the imposition of targets are wide-ranging, but tend to fall into certain recognised categories. The most common of these is the phenomenon known as 'gaming', [21] which can be defined as, "…reactive subversion such as 'hitting the target and missing the point' or reducing performance where targets do not apply."[22]

Bevan and Hood identify three main types of gaming:

1. 'Ratchet effects' – where next year's targets are based on last year's performance, resulting in a perverse incentive for managers to under-report current performance in order to secure a less demanding target for next year.

2. 'Threshold effects' – where performance across different functions is reported as a whole. This has the effect of disguising poor individual or departmental performance and encourages high performance to deteriorate to the norm.

3. 'Output distortions' – where targets are achieved at the expense of important but unmeasured aspects of performance.[23]

Other consequences of target-based performance management are:

- Tunnel vision – where managers select some targets (usually the easiest to achieve or measure) and ignore others.

- Sub-optimisation – where managers operate in such a way that serves their own operation but damages the performance of the overall system.

- Myopia – where managers focus on achievable short-term objectives at the expense of longer-term aims.

- Ossification – where a performance indicator has become outdated but has not been removed or revised, and energy is still directed towards achieving it.[24]

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21 See for example: Deming (1986); Deming (1994); Seddon (2003); Seddon (2008)
22 Bevan and Hood (2006) p.523
23 Adapted from Bevan and Hood (2006)
24 Adapted from: Smith (1990) pp.53-72; Pidd (2005) pp.482-493

It's Not Just a Police Problem

Examples of these effects were witnessed across the public sector throughout the NPM period and continue to this day. Wherever numerical targets exist, one or more of these effects will not be far away. Bevan and Hood's research concentrated on the effect of targets in the NHS, where they exposed examples of patients being left waiting in ambulances outside A&E departments until the hospital was confident that they could be seen within the stipulated target time. Tactics included trolleys in corridors being classed as 'beds', so as to outwit the target time for admissions, and special rooms 'appearing' next to A&E waiting rooms that weren't classed as waiting rooms, so that waiting time there did not count against the clock.[25] The research also found that there was no correlation between performance, awarded in star ratings, and the quality of clinical care provided by hospitals.

Separate research indicates that the four hour A&E target caused a disproportionate rate of admissions immediately prior to the four hour point in *all but one* hospital in England.[26] The distortion amidst the data typifies gaming activity and signifies decisions being driven by fear of missing the target (as in my personal experience at my local A&E department). Interestingly, the only hospital that ignored the target was found to have delivered a *better* service at *lower* cost.

Even the infamous 48-hour target for GP's appointments (intended so no one would have to wait more than 48 hours to see their GP) had the perverse effect of preventing prospective patients making an appointment any time outside of the next 48 hours.[27] Patients could not phone up on a Monday to book an appointment with their GP on the Friday of that week; they had to ring on a Wednesday or Thursday instead.

Other public sector organisations have suffered similar experiences.[28] One of the most notable examples is that of the education sector. As a direct consequence of target-driven performance management, instances of 'teaching to the test' occurred as educational establishments desperately tried to avoid the stigma of being positioned towards the bottom of

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25   Bevan and Hood (2006)

26   Longman, H. (2011)

27   Hood (2006) pp.515-521

28   For a comprehensive review of dysfunctional behaviour caused by targets in health and education, see: Rothstein (2008)

government league tables.[29] Richard Bird, a former head teacher and legal consultant to the Association of School and College Leaders, argues:

> The skills of beating examination systems have not been lost to teachers today. Question-spotting; framework-providing; technique-coaching are all alive and well and producing their misleading results.[30]

Separate research identified that the pressure to meet targets has led to teachers concentrating '…on a narrow band of marginal students who were close to target thresholds…'[31] at the expense of other students. Others point towards output distortions (see above) occurring as a direct result of target-driven performance management within education, resulting in neglect of those domains of education that are not subject to targets.[32]

The Impact of Targets on Policing

How does target-driven performance management affect the police service? A good starting point is to look at how targets influence the way in which organisational priorities are designated or, rather, how targets skew policy and operational activity. The effects of targets become apparent if we examine the amount of importance that is placed on particular crime types.

For example, house burglaries, robberies and vehicle thefts are classed as 'Serious Acquisitive Crime' and are the subject of their own special targets. This means that the Serious Acquisitive Crime category is constantly in the management's spotlight when it comes to performance against targets.

Police officers already want to catch burglars – it's in the blood; so it's debatable whether the existence of an arbitrary numerical target will spur any frontline bobby to want to catch burglars that little bit more. Problems arise when placing a target on one classification of burglary inadvertently elevates its importance to the detriment of other equally serious offences (including other 'types' of burglary). Let's have a look at why this is the case.

The correct classification for what any member of the public would think of as being a house burglary is known in my force as 'Burglary Dwelling

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29   For more on the effects of target-driven performance management in the education sector, see: Loveday (2005) pp.97-102; Hood (2006) pp.515-521; Heinrich and Marschke (2010) pp.183-208

30   Bird, R. (2008)

31   Hood (2006) p.518

32   See: Jacob (2005); Heinrich (2008)

House' (BDH). This classification extends to garages that are linked to the house by an integral door. Conversely, an identical garage that is not linked to the house (even if it used to have an integral door that has now been bricked up) is considered as a distinct structure in law and, if it is burgled, the correct crime classification is 'Burglary Other Building' (BOB). (Different police forces use different acronyms. For example, Cheshire has BIADs and BOTIADs – Burglary In A Dwelling and Burglary Other Than In A Dwelling. Bit of trivia there for you.) Now imagine two houses next to each other with identical attached garages, but where only one has an integral door to the house. If both garages are broken into during the same night and property to an identical value is stolen, the two victims will receive a differential service if there is a target-driven bias towards Burglary Dwelling House offences. Although no actual house was entered, the victim whose burglary is classified as BDH will receive an enhanced service – a faster response, CID attendance, extensive house-to-house enquiries and forensic scene examiners checking for fingerprints or DNA evidence. In contrast, his or her neighbours could be given a crime number over the phone, or if they are lucky might receive a visit from a local bobby sometime during the next few days. Theoretically, this could still apply if a pot of paint was the only item taken during the BDH and a £30,000 car was taken during the BOB offence.[33]

Common sense would dictate that they should be investigated as linked incidents, but the reality is that without intervention from someone who is prepared to deviate from policy, the burglaries would be treated differently, with each enquiry being routed to a different department to deal with in isolation.

These invisible dividing lines (which do not exist to the victims of crime) are a symptom of a disjointed system that operates through departments performing functional specialisms in silos. Targets that result in the prioritisation of certain offence types, or internal classifications that determine differential levels of service, impart no benefit to the service user. The overall consequences to the system are similar to those caused by thematic tampering (Chapter Four).

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33   This example was presented by Chief Inspector Nick Bailey at the Vanguard Policing In Austerity conference, Birmingham, 13th September 2011.

The Ground-Level Impact

In the 2012 RSA research paper, 'Reflexive Coppers', the authors highlight targets as being one of the main barriers to the provision of a quality service. In their words:

> Like all public services, the police service has experienced years of 'target culture', obliging police to face inwards and upwards, reporting to management in quantitative terms, rather than outwards to communities seeking quality.[34]

Other researchers have consistently found this situation to be the norm. Former Chief Constable Peter Neyroud and Dr. Emma Disley of the RAND Corporation, for example, acknowledge the pressure caused by targets and warn of its consequences for the effective investigation of serious criminal offences:

> …pressure to meet targets encourages managers to focus on volume crime investigations which are less resource intensive, at the expense of proper investigations of more serious crimes.[35]

In extreme cases, proactively targeting a particular offence type (e.g. prostitution or drug activity) can have the undesirable consequence of *increasing* recorded crime. This paradox was recognised by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in a report that noted:

> It is a moot point whether it made sense for the government to set a target to reduce police recorded robbery in the first place, given that increases might well reflect enhanced police action in this area. Ironically, the government's target on street crime has risked creating a perverse incentive for police forces to avoid identifying and recording robbery offences.[36]

There is also the risk that as confidence in police ability to deal with such offences increases, the public are more likely to report incidents that might not have been reported previously. This would then give the impression that the crime rate is increasing, which damages public confidence (a policing target), increases the fear of crime (another target) and prevents crime reduction targets from being met.

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34   Rowson, Lindley, and Stanko, (2012)
35   Neyroud and Disley (2007) p.563
36   Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (2007)

Aside from the effect of targets directly influencing policies or priorities, their impact is felt in almost all corners of operational policing, and this affects the behaviour of individuals in a multitude of ways. Police officers are human beings just like you and me. (I happen to be both.) When placed in a situation where the attainment of targets becomes the primary objective, not even police officers are immune to the pressure to meet them.

A classic example of how targets can dictate the way in which officers on the ground respond to crime is in what many officers would recognise as the 'Section Five versus Drunk and Disorderly' debate. Both offences can apply to drunken and abusive behaviour in the street, both can attract an arrest, a night in the cells and an £80 fixed penalty. But, Section Five of the Public Order Act 1986 is classed as a crime, whereas being Drunk and Disorderly is not.

If you have ever witnessed drunken and abusive revellers in a city centre at 2am on a Saturday night it can be quite unpleasant and can spoil the night for everyone else who is just out for a good time. It's right that the police should intervene to stop this sort of behaviour, and make an arrest if that is deemed to be appropriate.

The problem is this: Section Five counts towards detection targets, whereas being Drunk and Disorderly does not. So, if the police are under pressure to meet detection targets then officers can be incentivised to make arrests under the Public Order Act offence.[37] Of course, this works in reverse if the focus for a local commander is to reduce crime; officers can be persuaded to deal with an identical incident by arresting under Drunk and Disorderly.

There are consequences for the arrested person. If officers are incentivised to arrest for Section Five then someone who behaves like a drunken fool rather than a nasty aggressive drunk, may well end up with a criminal record as a result. Conversely, an aggressive, abusive, threatening drunkard, who would be most appropriately dealt with under Section Five, could be treated leniently because of organisational pressures. Either way, the problem can be traced back to the target. The decision should, of course, be down to the officer on the street to use his or her professional judgement to determine which offence is most appropriate.

'Gaming' in *how* crimes are recorded (or not recorded) is another problem. John Seddon's work with police forces leads him to state, 'There

37   'We Are Making Ludicrous Arrests Just to Meet our Targets' *The Times* (2007) [Online] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article1790515.ece

have been many examples of police officers reclassifying offences in order to meet targets – for example, reclassifying shop theft as burglary'.[38] Depending on whether a target focuses on crime reduction or crime detection will determine whether officers are encouraged to under-record a particular offence type (where there is little chance of detecting it) or over-record it (where there is an easy arrest).

How to Beat The System

So, how else do resourceful human beings respond when they are pressured to meet targets? Well, police performance charts that count things, such as the number of intelligence logs submitted per team, provide a good example of how targets can be achieved despite failing to achieve purpose. If teams are pitted against each other to produce more intelligence logs, no one wants to be in the spotlight for being at the bottom of the league table. Common tricks can include:

- Submitting an intelligence log for the most mundane piece of information (e.g. 'The kids have been hanging around by the shops again').

- Breaking one piece of information into multiple pieces to enable the submission of several logs for the same piece of intelligence (e.g. Log 1: "John Smith is associating with Frank Jones". Log 2: "John Smith and Frank Jones stole a car, registration number ABC123 three days ago". Log 3: "Vehicle registration number ABC123 was involved in a burglary two days ago").

- Duplicating information already captured by another process (e.g. submitting an intelligence log as well as a stop and search form after conducting a search in the street).

- Two officers working together, who both submit an intelligence log about the same incident.

Of course, the result of this sort of activity is that the volume of intelligence logs increases, and the intelligence department will have to wade through an excessive amount of submissions that are of limited or no use. Not only does this cause delays by clogging the system, but any intelligence of real value risks being lost in the 'noise'. (Aside from

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38   Seddon (2008) pp.124-125

the perverse effects caused by the target, counting intelligence logs is meaningless anyway, as they are merely an *input*, rather than an outcome in their own right.)

One Sergeant who took part in the research conducted for this book summed up the situation as follows:

> *"Recently we had a target that all officers would submit a set amount of intelligence reports. The result was that the system and intel office were drowning in a sea of pointless intel reports. We moved from quality to quantity".*

These perverse outcomes are neatly summed up by Professors James Fesler of Yale University and Donald Kettl of the University of Maryland:

> Excessive controls multiply requirements for review of proposed actions, increase red tape, and delay action. So much energy can be spent attempting to control administrative activities, in fact, that little time or money is left to do the job at hand.[39]

In other words, the system is crippled. Surely this is the exact opposite of what management set out to achieve?

The desperate efforts of those under the cosh who are trying to avoid unscientific and ultra-critical exposure somewhere near the foot of a league table are not a peculiarity of just the local performance management scene either. Sensationalist headlines such as 'UK's worst police forces named'[40] do nothing but further ingrain the targets mentality at a national level and increase pressure on entire organisations that are deemed to be 'failing'. Schools and hospitals have also found themselves in this invidious position over the last few years,[41] despite the fact that research has shown that league table methodology is inherently unstable and causes potentially damaging effects.[42] Separate research also indicates that an organisation's position within a league table does not necessarily bear any relation to its actual performance.[43]

Despite this, police forces across the country are compared against each other using the league table approach. Indeed the established mode

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39   Fesler and Kettl (1991) p.321
40   'UK's Worst Police Forces Named.' *Daily Mail* (2006) [Online] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-412255/UKs-worst-police-forces-named.html
41   See: Loveday (2005); Hood, C. (2006) pp.515-521
42   See: Goldstein and Spiegelhalter (1996) pp.13-26
43   Bevan and Hood (2006) pp.17-538

of comparison for police forces nationally is a performance management tool called iQuanta.[44] This compares forces' crime data and aggregates performance into simplistic descriptors, such as 'Clearly improving', 'No apparent change' and 'Clearly deteriorating'. These determinations are presented next to 'up' and 'down' arrows (binary comparisons, again). The 'up' arrow is green of course. The method used makes it impossible to identify signals. How anyone can say performance is 'clearly improving' or 'clearly deteriorating' is, therefore, beyond me. You can imagine the effect the label 'Clearly deteriorating' has on senior managers.

The Human Cost

The consequences of target-driven performance management extend beyond merely causing an internal 'bump in the carpet' elsewhere in the system. The ubiquitous nature of policing targets damages organisational trust, professional judgement and frontline discretion. In extreme cases it can be responsible for affecting the psychological well-being of officers who are unable to reconcile the true organisational purpose of policing with the artificial incentives and implicit sanctions of a working environment dominated by targets.

The authors of the RSA report 'Reflexive Coppers' highlight the tension that is generated when officers who simply want to do the right thing are caught up in an organisational environment dominated by targets:

> A job that is 'figures driven' creates pressure to report on situations and manage relationships in a way that creates the desired figures, which does not rest easily with professional goals to serve and protect the public.[45]

This takes us right back to the notion of purpose. What is the purpose of the police? It certainly isn't to feed internal performance indicators, or to service politicians' desire for arbitrary numerical targets to be met.

Whether the pressure to meet targets involves mainly carrots, sticks or both, the results are often the same. The following quotes from officers in different forces are typical:

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44   Here's a recent, randomly selected iQuanta document: Rutland CSP (2012) [Online] http://www. rutland.gov.uk/pdf/Late%20Paper%202_Crime%20Forecast_Agenda%206.pdf

45   Rowson, Lindley and Stanko (2012) p.19

"Every officer at the police station where I work is set targets for arrests per week. Pressure is brought to bear on officers to bring in arrests because the team then receives a point."[46]

"There is bullying in the police to hit the targets we allegedly don't have."[47]

"I seem to spend all my time chasing performance targets rather than actually doing the job…"[48]

"Every week I have to fill in a coded spreadsheet for my Inspector detailing how many arrests I've made, how many tickets I've given out, the number of stops or searches I have made, how many intel submissions I've made".[49]

"At the end of every single shift I get asked for my figures".[50]

"We have a performance board in our station. It shows "UP" and "DOWN" arrows, in red (bad) and green (good) and % figures".

A wealth of evidence suggests that the culture of organisations which rely on tight control and compliance mechanisms adversely affects worker motivation, and lowers productivity – the precise opposite of what management would have wanted. Morale is sapped and those subject to management scrutiny and control can feel dehumanised.[51] Furthermore, the inflexible, process-driven approach that results from target-driven performance management fatally restricts innovation, constrains professionalism, and turns the workforce into virtual automatons.[52] In extreme cases excessive controls and 'micromanagement' not only demoralise workers, but can even turn them against the system.[53]

Performance measurement expert, Dr. Dean Spitzer succinctly notes the relationship between targets and their effect on the working environment, as below:

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46   'Target Men.' *The Spectator*. (2011) . [Online] http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/all/6975453/target-men.thtml
47   Copperfield (2012) p.172
48   HMIC (2008) (p.97)
49   *ibid* p.174
50   *ibid*, p.180
51   See: Weber (1930); Weber (1947); Western (2007)
52   De Bruijn (2007)
53   Etzioni (1964)

> Hitting targets leads to a command-and-control orientation and compliance, especially where there are rewards or penalties associated with it. In such an environment, everything is focused on hitting the desired number – often by whatever means are available…[54]

Unethical Behaviour

At one end of the scale, targets create an incentive to focus efforts on 'easy' arrests and detections at the expense of more complex or problematic investigations or areas of policing that do not generate outputs that count towards the target.[55] As one officer explained, "… it's not all that surprising if we put more effort into detecting the easier stuff. Picking the low hanging fruit".[56] Another good analogy is "…counting the ants while the elephants march by".[57]

At the other end of the scale, there is a risk that pressure from management to achieve targets can increase the likelihood of unethical activity. For example, research into the effect of the New York Police Department's (NYPD) target-driven performance management system (known as COMPSTAT) uncovered cases of heavy-handed policing that occurred purely as a result of officers desperately trying to meet quotas for arrests and tickets.[58]

Furthermore, in the UK, a recent report in the media suggested that officers were 'fiddling' response times to meet the targets for emergency incidents.[59] Would people be tempted to do this if there was no pressure to meet targets? Being a fast response driver myself, I know the only motivation when responding to an emergency incident is to get there as quickly and safely as possible. 'Protect and Serve', remember?

The pressure to meet targets could, in extreme cases, result in people's human rights being infringed through unnecessary arrests or unlawful searches. One officer wrote:

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54   Spitzer (2007) pp.42-43

55   Examples of officers concentrating on 'easy' arrests to meet targets have been widely reported in the press. These three articles are fairly typical: Leapman (2007); Tendler (2007); Monro (2008)

56   Copperfield (2012) p.164

57   Inspector, 15 years' service, Eastern Force. Research conducted by the author.

58   Eterno and Silverman (2012)

59   Whitehead (2010)

> We were recently told that our BCU *[Basic Command Unit – in essence, a police division]* PACE 1s *[stop and searches]* had fallen to an unacceptable level on our internal force league table and that we needed to stop-search more people. Bearing in mind we can only stop people on reasonable suspicion that they are committing or have committed criminal acts, surely the only way you can stop *more* people on reasonable suspicion that they are committing criminal acts is if you *see* more people of whom you have reasonable suspicion that they are committing criminal acts?[60]

In his 2008 Review of Policing, Sir Ronnie Flanagan highlighted similar risks, emphasising the increased possibility of people being unnecessarily criminalised:

> The consequences of poor professional judgement, combined with existing performance management arrangements, are that officers are encouraged to criminalise people for behaviour which may have caused offence but the underlying behaviour would be better dealt with in a different way.[61]

His words do not suggest that officers were making *unlawful* arrests, just that the pressure to meet targets and feed internal performance management requirements had trumped common sense and doing the right thing. The effect of restricting the exercise of frontline professional judgement, combined with the pressure to meet targets, has led to several embarrassing news reports and incredulity from the general public. The following are just some examples:

- A child in Kent was arrested for removing a slice of cucumber from a sandwich and throwing it at another child.[62]

- A 70-year-old Cheshire pensioner (who had never been in trouble with the police) was arrested for criminal damage after he was accused of cutting back a neighbour's conifers too vigorously.[63]

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60   Copperfield (2012) p.192
61   Flanagan (2008) p.57
62   Wright (2007)
63   Barratt (2007)

- A 13-year-old boy in the West Midlands (who had also never been in trouble) was arrested and formally reprimanded for assault, after throwing a water bomb at another youngster as a prank.[64]

One reporter neatly summed up the net effect of these types of incidents on public confidence, observing:

> The result is that the law-abiding public who are normally the staunchest supporters of the police are becoming terminally disenchanted with them.[65]

It's a clear case of 'Lose-Lose' for everyone concerned.

The Link Between Targets and Sub-Optimisation

Earlier on we looked at the concept of sub-optimisation, where one part of the system is optimised (has resources pumped into it) at the expense of the others. As we know, when other departments are adversely affected then the overall system suffers. The presence of targets or performance indicators in one part of the system will mean that those working within that department will do everything they can to meet the target (and avoid adverse management scrutiny), even at the expense of other departments.

For example, if call handlers are pressured by targets, the calls might have to be rushed and vital information could be missed. The control room operators could end up despatching response units to incidents without all the information the officers require to make a full assessment of what they might encounter when they arrive. The call handlers meet their target ('win') at the expense of the response unit officers who arrive at the incident appearing unprepared or unprofessional ('lose'). If crucial information is missed, such as a good description of a man with a knife, then members of the public and officers might be exposed to increased risk and the offender could get away ('lose'). This is what happens when individual components work against each other. The overall system loses.

A particular type of sub-optimisation, which I call *time-based sub-optimisation,* is different to other forms of sub-optimisation inasmuch as it does not involve departments working against each other. It involves departments working against themselves because of time-based targets.

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64   West Midlands Police (2008) p.33
65   Phillips (2007)

One of the most obvious forms of time-based sub-optimisation comes about as a result of annual budget targets. The limitations of the annual budget cycle are well documented by the likes of Allen Schick and Christopher Pollitt,[66] who argue that this traditional cycle introduces artificial parameters into what is essentially a longer-term process and that the budget should run concurrently alongside other facets of the system. The annual nature of traditional budgeting is renowned for causing miserly restraint throughout the financial year, then, in the last few weeks, the purse strings tend to be relaxed and organisations splash out on new furniture and anything else that can be purchased to prevent the end-of-year budget showing an underspend. There are 2 main drivers for the way in which this budget is currently allocated – 1) a fear of a dressing down from management for overspending, and 2) a fear of being allocated a reduced budget for the subsequent year (any underspend cannot be carried over to the next year).

A common method to try to control any negative outcome is to allocate a proportion of the budget to departments on a monthly basis (e.g. 50 hours overtime being permissible per month). But natural variation dictates that in some months the expenditure will amount to more than 50 hours and some months it will be less than 50 hours.

Traditional budgeting 'tricks' can include holding back from entering expenses until the beginning of the next quarter, or rushing contracts or product just ahead of the cut-off date to achieve quarterly targets. But, what happens when events can't be controlled – and criminals use up some of the monthly budget without checking with management first? When I was a Sergeant I bore the brunt of a dressing down for a monthly overspend, after six officers incurred two hours of overtime each following the arrest of four criminals who had stolen a car. Rather than congratulating the officers for a job well done, the Duty Inspector was furious about the dent in his monthly overtime target.

End of Month Detections Scramble

Another classic example of time-based sub-optimisation is when someone in management realises that their division only needs a few more detected offences to be registered before the end of the year to meet the detection target. In a burst of activity, big operations are dreamt up in an attempt to

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66   See: Schick (1998); Pollitt (1999)

arrest as many people as possible; this of course abstracts officers from other important duties, causing gaps elsewhere in the system. Audits and reviews are commissioned to try to identify investigations that might be on the cusp of finalisation; crime records are trawled to check if the correct boxes have been ticked, thereby ensuring the detection can be properly registered (some boxes are occasionally missed when the matter is filed), and admin are sometimes paid overtime to make sure that all available detections are entered into the system before close of play. Is any of this value work? Does any of it make a difference to the victim of crime?

This time-based sub-optimisation is akin to a situation where a long distance runner sets out to run twelve miles, but rather than set a steady pace throughout, inexplicably sprints the last two hundred yards of each mile. This technique will tire the runner and result in uneven performance, as well as a slower overall time. The same is true for the ongoing investigations that an officer manages. If left alone, the officer will prioritise workload and get more done throughout the year. Compared to the sub-optimised approach, which emphasises sudden bursts of activity without looking at the long-term picture, the average end-to-end time for investigations will be vastly reduced.

The extra work caused by this interference and sub-optimisation (e.g. getting rushed investigations back on track or re-attending to duties that officers were taken away from) has a knock-on effect on fresh investigations. Of course, when it comes to the end of next month, if the division is a few detections short of the target, the situation repeats itself, generating a cumulative effect on officers' ability to effectively manage their ongoing investigations.

The target might or might not have been hit. What is certain is that the system has been sub-optimised and overall performance will have suffered.

Nearest Available Officer

Sometimes the most powerful way to demonstrate how target-driven performance management causes damage to the overall system is to look at a real life example, where the result is so obviously perverse and undesirable that it completely exposes the flawed thinking behind target-setting. I particularly like this example because it shows how targets influence decision-making, leading to waste and nonsensical operational deployments that fly in the face of common sense.

First of all, here's a bit of background. UK police forces currently use a communications system called 'Airwave', a modern day version of the old police radio. Some forces have activated GPS tracking across their network, so that each individual Airwave terminal can be located and tracked. Control room staff can see on a screen where everyone is, which is helpful when deciding which unit to send to which job. It can also improve officers' safety, plus in the event that an entire team ever decided to park up somewhere and go to sleep whilst on night duty, this would show up as a big red glowing dot on the map. It would not take long for the Sergeant to find them…

The important factor to consider here is the effect of response time targets on control room operators' behaviour. In order to understand this I will first outline what police response time targets are all about. UK police forces use a grading system to categorise reported incidents. Although different forces use different terminology for the categories, the principles are pretty much the same, and result in tiered classifications based on perceived risk and urgency. These classifications determine how quickly and what type of police response ensues. The categories usually run along the lines of:

- Grade One: Immediate threat to life, crime in progress, or offender on scene.

- Grade Two: Early attendance desirable due to the nature of the incident, effect on the caller, or need to secure evidence/start a prompt investigation.

- Grade Three: Non-urgent incident where attendance is required but which falls outside of the above categories.

- Grade Four: Non-urgent incident where attendance can be scheduled for a mutually agreeable time.

- Grade Five: No attendance required; e.g. incident can be dealt with on the telephone.

It is the norm for response time targets to be set against both Grade One and Grade Two incidents; for example in West Midlands Police, the Grade One response classification attracts a target that states officers must arrive within 15 minutes of the call being received.[67] (This was revised from a

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67 *BBC* (2011) West Midlands Police to Increase 999 Response Times. [Online] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-13154124

longstanding 10-minute target in April 2011). Grade Two incidents are subject to a 60-minute target, whilst no fixed target exists for the remaining tiers for incidents in the West Midlands. Other forces apply similar time-based targets; these may vary but follow the same tiered approach.

Prioritising Things is Necessary; Targets are Bad

I believe that the notion of prioritising calls is entirely logical. It would be ridiculous for a report of a schoolchild calling another schoolchild a naughty name on Facebook (yes, we get these calls!) to be treated as urgently as a bank robbery in progress. The problems arise, however, when the major influence on decision-making is the target, rather than determining the most appropriate response. (I also don't believe that an officer responding to an emergency with blue lights and sirens would go any faster or slower whether a Grade One target was 10 minutes, 15 minutes, or anything else. As previously discussed, the objective is always to get there as quickly and safely as possible – the target is irrelevant.)

Putting real emergencies to one side, Grade Two incidents are often more problematic to manage. Categorising incidents ignores variety, and there is a vast range of incidents that are classed as Grade Two. One would hope, therefore, that the control room operators would be able to use their professional judgement and despatch officers accordingly.

In reality, this is easier said than done. The pressure to meet the target is greatly intensified when it is made known that response times are reviewed by management on a daily basis and individuals are expected to provide an explanation for any occurrences where the target was not achieved. Say a relatively low-risk Grade Two incident is almost reaching the target threshold at the same time as another higher-risk Grade Two incident still has 55 minutes left on the clock. Human nature dictates that when the operator is under pressure to meet targets, it will often be the older Grade Two incident that is prioritised, regardless of its nature or relative risk. This isn't because control room staff are bad people – it is the result of a one-size-fits-all classification system, intensified by numerical targets and management scrutiny: a dangerous combination. The result is that meeting the target becomes a major influencing factor on decision-making.

A Comedy of Targets

Consider this true story. It began when a neighbourhood dispute, a Grade Two incident, was reported. The control room staff realised the clock was ticking and, at that specific moment in time, all the local units were busy. A quick look on the GPS screen confirmed that the nearest available resource, a firearms unit, was about 20 miles away, so in order to meet the target, this unit was despatched. Needless to say, firearms units are specialists who have a distinct role to perform. The appearance of armed officers at a low-level incident risks giving the impression of a disproportionate or overbearing police response, and this could have a negative impact on public confidence. The caller just wanted a word with her local beat bobby, who knew about the history behind the dispute, and was surprised to be faced with officers carrying loaded handguns on their belts.

Once the caller had recounted her story, it transpired that a criminal offence of threatening behaviour had been committed by her neighbour. The firearms officers had to complete a crime report, obtain statements, and compile associated paperwork. But then the firearms officers were faced with a dilemma – the alleged offender was next door and needed to be arrested. They were overtly armed, and force policy prevents them from becoming involved in non-firearms incidents that may involve confrontation or making 'run of the mill' arrests.

The logic behind this is that the presence of police firearms at such a 'pre-planned' arrest is unnecessary and disproportionate to the perceived threat; plus if the offender becomes belligerent and a grappling match ensues, there is a danger that a gun could go off, or be taken off an officer. Furthermore, they do not have the option of leaving their guns in the car, for obvious reasons. This meant that whilst they had done an excellent job of meeting the target, their usefulness in this particular situation had reached its limit. The only solution was to wait for a local unit to become available to make the arrest.

In this case, the deployment of the firearms officers was a reaction completely motivated by the need to meet the 60-minute response time target. Fortunately, there were no firearms incidents reported whilst the officers were abstracted from their core function but using this specialist unit caused inefficiency and damage to the overall system. When this approach is repeated throughout the day, the effect is multiplied and results in an impaired level of service to the public.

For me, the systems solution to effective despatch of police resources lies in trusting the professional judgement of the control room operators. I would remove all time-based targets and rely on a simple classification that records whether an incident is an emergency or not. If it is an emergency, then the appropriate resources are despatched to get there as quickly and safely as possible. Here, GPS can assist the control room staff in deciding which resources to send. If it isn't an emergency, then the response should be prioritised against all the other live incidents, taking into account the exact nature of the call, along with factors such as the seriousness of the incident, the vulnerability of the caller, and the anticipated benefits of a quick response.

It is still important to record actual response times so that managers can understand the capabilities of the system. Through intelligent interpretation of this data, using SPC charts, managers can identify opportunities for improving the system, as well as identify and act upon obstacles that adversely affect performance. (This could be as simple as relocating default patrol areas to locations where there is a predictably high demand, thereby reducing response times.) If the data indicate that there is an evidence base for the introduction of a systemic change, then it is appropriate to make it. No target will tell you this.

Conclusion

Targets are so ingrained in the organisational psyche that many managers, workers and observers accept them without question. This is precisely why it is so important to challenge targets and the traditional assumptions that are associated with them.

Target-driven performance management is based on an underlying desire to control the workers, along with a basic assumption that they are primarily driven by extrinsic motivators. Any short-term 'results' it squeezes out of the workers through the traditional blend of rewards, sanctions and fear are only ever achieved at great unseen expense. Targets *always* change behaviour, and invariably the behaviour they instigate is unpalatable and counterproductive. The long term cost is felt through sub-optimisation, gaming, and the catastrophic harm that is caused to the system. Target-driven performance management makes service delivery worse and is terminally damaging to worker motivation and morale.

Optimistic 'safeguards' and mitigations, such as attempting to carefully design targets or limit their application, are undermined by the fact that

it is scientifically impossible to set a numerical target in the first place. I repeat – this means that, without exception, *all* numerical targets are completely arbitrary. Furthermore, the paltry single figure adjustments typical of numerical targets (e.g. to reduce crime by 5%) artificially constrain ambition and potential. The only 'target' worth striving towards is perfection.

In summary, I present my position on targets as a simple two-point statement:

1. All numerical targets are arbitrary.

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

I therefore submit that targets are the single most pernicious element of conventional management practice and should be abandoned.