A blind pursuit

Ron Donaldson questions the use of targets in a world that has been taught that if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed

Once upon a time, the only reason anyone used targets was for teaching the youngsters how to use a bow and arrow. As the years went by and we invented rifles, tanks and games consoles, the metaphor seeped into our consciousness and somehow spread into management training manuals.

Two recent articles in the same *Sunday Times* made me realise just how poorly our government understands complexity and complex systems. The first was about a government-commissioned report on the NHS[1], and described: "… a blind pursuit of political and managerial targets as the root cause of a string of hospital scandals that have cost thousands of lives". The second, 'Too many GCSEs make children ill'[2] reported that Maggie Atkinson, the new children's commissioner, thinks "many children were under such stress to achieve good exam results that they lacked a work-life balance and were at risk of falling ill from stress".

The delivery of all the public services, from health and education to the police and the natural environment, seem to suffer from an over abundance of targets and measurement.

Ever the optimist, I believe this to be the result of a human inability to live with uncertainty and a misguided belief that simplifying an entire process into numerical targets gives the feeling of 'control' – and that there is rarely any malicious intent. Dave Snowden, with his numerous blog postings on the subject, is less generous when he terms it the "occult significance of meaningless numbers".

For decades we have taught managers that if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed and the National Audit Office prides itself that 20 years of performance measurement has developed into an important means of improving performance and reinforcing accountability. Victor Newman, the knowledge activist, reverses this when he says that organisations are beginning to "only manage what they measure".

There are enough supporting stories out there to fill a book. From the schools ditching languages as they realise that a failure to reach the Government's minimum target of 30 per cent A* to C grades at GCSE, including maths and English, might result in enforced closure. To the focus on the number of pairs of hen harriers that constitute a recovered population, when this distracts attention from the more complex situation of having a viable population of hen harriers in the UK – for example, cultural intolerance for birds of prey.

And it's not as if this measurement and target setting comes cheap. Accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers found that councils each spend £1.8m a year proving their compliance to regulators[3].

Cox, Little and Clark have written an excellent paper on 'a Systems perspective of targets' stating their findings that "in almost every case the things that influence why it takes less or more time are not in control of the individual worker". This is the main reason why targets can motivate people to do the wrong thing and keep you blind to the true performance of your service. If, as they suggest, "system performance is 95 per cent down to system conditions and only five per cent to elements of performance attributable to the individual" then why do we direct so much resource at measuring individual performance?

John Seddon has probably written the most on this subject against what he terms "target obsession disorder". His highly recommended book, *Systems thinking in the Public Sector*, states repeatedly that "targets always make a system worse" and gets to the most interesting point of all when he argues that "the true purpose of measures is to learn and improve, and targets don't help learning". Seddon's hard-hitting ideas on designing work around demand and liberating the method to the workers is tantalisingly attractive.

Measuring a system is only possible, Dave Snowden recommends, if we measure impact instead of progress against predicted outcome. As a joint Narrate/Cognitive Edge experiment project we have just completed a swift run of anecdote circles across Europe, where sales people told and self-signified their stories in local groups. By inputting the collected outputs into SenseMaker we gave senior management direct access to the patterns across the narrative space of their staff, enabling learning and improving the impact of future communications and policies. The emergent levels of trust, community and identity added to our belief that this is a genuine alternative to target setting and outcome-based measures. So forgive me for over-extending the metaphor, but perhaps our jobs as knowledge workers are more like that of a guide dog. Inside Knowledge

Ron Donaldson is a knowledge ecologist and can be contacted at ezrond@gmail.com, followed at http://twitter.com/rondon, or viewed at http://rondon.wordpress.com

References

1. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article7052606.ece
2. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article7052531.ece
3. http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/public_sector/article6733600.ece