

A Response to *Does “Deliverology” Matter?: Targets Can Work *If Done Properly**



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A Response to *Does “Deliverology” Matter?: Targets Can Work If Done Properly*

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. How to (Responsibly) Develop Targets.....	1
3. How to Apply and Use Targets.....	2
4. How to Manage Targets.....	2
5. Conclusion.....	3

target: something that you are trying to do or achieve (Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary)

1. Introduction

["Does Deliverology Matter?"](#) provides a good review of past problems and potential future pitfalls in the implementation of 'Deliverology'. Mark Schacter's examples of the problems with an over-emphasis on targets ring familiar.¹ Poorly contextualized targeting can certainly mislead, incite manipulation and create perverse effects. (I particularly liked Mark's reference to *synecdoche* – a part (measure) assumed to stand for the whole – leading people to focus on one aspect of performance at the expense of others. This was practically 'programmed in' to the Program Activity Architecture (PAA) in times past. *Plus* – 'synecdoche' makes a great new scrabble word!)

Schacter proceeds from a valid critique of deliverology's past failings in the UK and elsewhere to suggest that there is a "fundamental incompatibility of targeting with much of what the public sector actually does". This seems extreme. While there certainly are areas that are easier to measure and target than others – a point that has been long identified by scholars – and was a direct topic of past Performance and Planning Exchange discussions,² this doesn't mean that there is a fundamental incompatibility of targeting with public policies, programs and initiatives. I suggest that the key lies in *how* one develops, applies and manages targets.

2. How to (Responsibly) Develop Targets

Experience with government and not-for-profit organizations suggests that successful targets can be developed when the following principles are followed:

1. **Start with the problems / gaps / opportunities:** Targets that are developed without reference to a problem, gap or opportunity tend to seem arbitrary. Targets should logically flow from an analysis of the situation. If a certain metric or set of metrics suggest that there is an issue or problem – then the inferred 'target' is the level of that metric that suggests the problem is resolved (or at least that the problem is being addressed). For example, if the rate of self-assessed use of sun protection (protective clothes, sunscreen etc.) in a population is lower than the practice in a contextually similar jurisdiction (and rates of sun-related skin melanoma are alarmingly high), then the 'target' can be to get people to use sun protection up to an acceptable level in key target populations.
2. **Work with the stakeholders involved to develop targets:** If the problem has been properly assessed, then the groups and stakeholders who can be considered close to it (though not necessarily those who do not believe in the 'problem' or who benefit from it) should be engaged and involved in setting a plan to help resolve the problem and targets (involving indicators) to mark progress in addressing it. Key stakeholders must co-own goals and targets.
3. **Tie targets to behavioural change logic:** Policies, programs and initiatives are collections of behaviours. Whether one uses conventional logic models, results chains or other mental models or depictions of behaviour change – targets work best when they relate to human individuals and groups and logical sequences of change in engagement, awareness, knowledge, commitment and actions. Higher level outcome targets (e.g. disease rates, wealth or overall wellness levels) should be tied to targeted behaviours within your sphere of influence.³

¹ See my critiques of the over-simplified targeting and measurement practices of Government initiatives from previous decades <http://www.pmn.net/wp-content/uploads/Beyond-Balanced-Scorecards.pdf> and <http://www.pmn.net/wp-content/uploads/The-Wisdom-of-Crowds1.pdf>

² See presentation by Dr. Evert Lindquist at a PPX learning event January 22, 2013 (<http://ppx.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Presentation2.pdf>).

³ See Circles of Influence S. Montague <http://www.pmn.net/wp-content/uploads/Circles-of-Influence.pdf>. This was recognized as a major Canadian insight by European reviewers in the mid 2000s. See <http://www.pmn.net/2011/01/reviews/>.

4. **Link targets to life cycle plans:** If a policy, program or initiative is intended to work over a period of time, then set progressive results targets (inspired by point 3) above) over that time period. This might involve engaging the right groups and garnering their support in early phases, building capacity in the system, influencing groups to take action (e.g. adopt a practice, policy or protocol) and then seeing these actions in turn influence system risks, problems or benefits. The key is to target and measure the right thing at the right time.

3. How to Apply and Use Targets

Once targets have been developed according to appropriate principles within an appropriate context – they must be *applied* appropriately. Organizations such as the International Development Research Centre and the Canadian Cancer Society have gone to calling results measures ‘progress’ measures as opposed to ‘performance’ measures.⁴ The key to appropriately applying targets is to see them as a representation of desired progress in results and expectations. Monitoring actual sequences of results vs. expectations needs to be done somewhat frequently and used for learning *before* being used for accountability.

This means that the first response from all levels of management when some variances from targets are observed should be to ask about the variance in terms of exploring what is going on across the system and seeking to further understand the situation – as opposed to implicitly or explicitly rewarding or punishing groups or people. A good example of this was when, in the mid 2000s – the Canadian Cancer Society’s Cancer Information Service (CIS) – a phone-based service for people living with cancer – experienced decline in use (i.e. Use went below set targets.). This caused consternation until the Performance Management Team asked what was happening to the web site connections. It turned out the website use was rising as fast or faster than the phone service use was declining. This actually could be interpreted as an improvement in the cost-effectiveness of reach since people were switching to a less costly CCS service for information.

In summary, targets should be treated as expectations found in your plan. The comparison of actuals to targets should be treated as feedback – providing information to help learning and management decisions. When done systematically – management and staff can then be held accountable for learning and adjustment in the light of new information – rather than being held accountable for previously assigned targets – often made with limited information.

4. How to Manage Targets

If the above noted principles for development and use of targets are followed – then they will be treated as contextualized, planned results expectations which will be used to help manage a policy, program or initiative. If they are developed thoughtfully, done with the engagement of key stakeholders and decision-makers and used as part of feedback for learning and decision-support – then even hard-to-measure areas can benefit from targets. In fact, if the objective is learning (about how to define success as well monitoring progress), comparing actual results to expectations in hard-to-measure complex areas can provide far *more* learning⁵ than occurs in more straightforward easy- to-measure processes and services. In any case, results frameworks, indicators, results plans and targets should be subject to frequent systematic review in the name of good management and improvement.

⁴ The term ‘progress’ connotes mission progress while the term performance is associated with personnel performance appraisals. Such connotations can make a difference in how indicators and targets are perceived.

⁵ Our experience suggests that trying to define, measure and target difficult concepts like ‘engagement’, ‘trust’, ‘deterrence’ and ‘empowerment’ cause useful conversations across and among groups about what one is doing with and for whom and why.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the recent Deliverology movement has many potential pitfalls, its inclusion of the concept of targets is not one of them. When it comes to targets – the problem is with *how* they are developed, used and managed – not necessarily with the idea of targets themselves. Let us hope that upcoming Federal Government results frameworks will employ the key principles noted above to allow targets to be used appropriately, without fear and with a focus on improving mission achievement.⁶

About the Author

[Steve Montague](#) is a Fellow of the Canadian Evaluation Society, an adjunct professor at Carleton University and a career practitioner in performance planning, measurement and evaluation. He is co-founder and current co-president of the Performance and Planning Exchange (<http://ppx.ca/en/about-ppx-eng/>) which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary dedicated to promoting the exchange of information, ideas and insights on performance planning, measurement and management. For more information on the content of this post please contact Steve directly at steve.montague@pmn.net. You may also wish to join the PPX Linked-in group at <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4846232/profile>.

⁶ For a brief summary of an approach pioneered at the Canadian Cancer Society which employs the principles noted in this paper see http://www.pmn.net/wp-content/uploads/CCS_presentation.pdf and <http://www.pmn.net/wp-content/uploads/Health-Charities-Performance-Story-Presentation.pdf>.