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The Tyranny of Targets

On average we train and coach approximately 175 individuals a month. They come from different sectors and backgrounds, are directors, senior managers and practitioners. Despite this broad range, some common themes emerge with the primary complaint concerning working with targets.

How did this happen?

A fairly typical situation recently was a group of police officers ordered to stay near a major supermarket for two days to arrest shoplifters. The target was met, but at what cost? It targeted the same individuals, worked against other crime reduction initiatives, did not fit into the neighbourhood priorities and disheartened the officers involved. The whole group talked with increasing cynicism about 'the system'. In my view, a little cynicism might be healthy, but too much can become cancerous - it undermines team life.

How to respond?

Much has been said and written about the folly of targets that become meaningless. I want to explore how we as a colleague or manager can best respond. What is our role here? Is it to sympathise? Get irritated with them? Have a good old rant about the system? Tempting at times, but it gets us nowhere, least of all with our client, patient or customer.

The first thing is to *listen*. There is usually not only moaning and frustration, but underneath all this, a strong desire to do work that attracted them to the job in the first place - often client-centred work. Focusing on targets takes

them away from this. My role as facilitator is firstly to make them feel heard. Sometimes this is all that's needed. Then I reflect back the positive elements of what they are saying, as this helps them feel less of an angry rebel and more of a concerned professional wrestling with a real conundrum. Once we've worked out that the frustration is partly or wholly because what they are doing (target driven work) is not aligned to their sense of vocation, we are in a better position to respond. We now look for creative ways to align these two.

A recent example was in the hospitality sector. A hotel chain set weekly targets for staff to sell 'extras' to customers. Initially the individuals in question responded with great energy to the challenge. However, as time went on they all found it increasingly hard to meet the same targets. Although the targets were the same, somehow they were not getting the results in sales as before, and the job satisfaction had dropped. As we explored this together, we worked out that the core of job satisfaction - real customer care - was getting lost. In focusing too hard on pushing a particular product such as a bottle of wine, they had paid less attention to some of the fundamentals of customer care such as establishing rapport with customers and so on. In letting go of the focus on sales and getting back to looking after the customer, job satisfaction goes up and then it is easier to embrace and succeed in meeting targets because they are in their rightful place - secondary to the core purpose of what the job is about.

When I listen to groups or individuals, I pick up on their sense of vocation - what drew them to this job. It can be many things, from a desire to serve the public more, contribute to society, financial reward and so on. Not surprisingly I have never heard someone talk of the pure love of meeting targets! Targets can have a purpose in extending us to achieve more. But if they are given too significant a place or authority, this is inviting trouble. In too many organisations, *indicators* of success get confused and become measures of success. They are two different things.

Targets are sometimes good and sometimes plain daft. How to tell the difference? Good targets usually blend in to extend the job, rather than seem at odds with the job. They are set more collaboratively. Poor targets seem to:

- bear little relation to what the job is about
- be imposed on the workforce
- be the result of a misinterpretation of indicators of success
- be translated crudely to become targets that practitioners must achieve

When determining good or poor targets, it is best to 'zoom out' of the situation and look at it objectively. A target may make sense in the abstract, but examine it objectively in relation to other factors and it can actually work against good practice. This is where we need to use our influencing skills to ask those who set the targets 'What was intended with this or that target?' 'What is actually happening here?'

For example, in the context of Youth Justice, no one would argue that finding a job or gaining a college place is a significant factor in reducing reoffending. It is a well proven fact. When it happens, and the young person secures that sought after job or place at college, it is a good outcome; an indication perhaps that interventions are working well. By making it a target, problems arise because it ignores the fact that there were many other variables in the equation of getting that job placement/place at college etc.

Practitioners feel under pressure because of targets to push their young people too early with the result that a 'box gets ticked', but the work placement quickly breaks down resulting in greater disenchantment. I have seen this happen on countless occasions in different sectors where the pressure of targets results in individuals feeling processed like a tin of peas.

Deliberately letting go of the pressure to attain a target is not about giving up ambition for the client or the organisation. The opposite is true. The practitioner can more easily give undivided attention to their client, making them feel valued and more willing to explore possibilities. The same principle applies in selling a product. Yet somehow we can lose the sense of joy in a job, overlooking what really matters. The fact that a young person manages to sit with you for half an hour may be a result in itself and a small but tangible step towards making the ultimate target more achievable.

How to work with targets

- Ask what is good about these targets? What is not good? How can we all get the best from this?
- Watch out for cynicism - don't even hint to a customer/client that you have to do this because of targets
- Try to influence the decision makers - using open questions, gently demonstrate the gap between what was hoped for in setting the targets and some of the unintended outcomes as a result
- Be aware of how targets are impacting on your own behaviour - are they energising you or weighing you down? This will affect morale.

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