



Are you aiming too high?

one of the reasons target setting is so hard, is that human emotion is left out of the equation

by Stacey Barr

introduction

What's your target achieving track record? Do you reach the majority of your targets within their set timeframes, or do you find yourself throwing up all kinds of rationalizations and reasons as to why the majority of your targets were not met? It might be because your target setting process is a little too much about numbers and not nearly enough about emotion, about how people feel about the various aspects of target setting, pursuing and achieving.

targets must speak to the heart, not just the head

Targets that are an almost mathematical arrangement of “performance measure + target value + timeframe” speak loudly and clearly to the head. They say nothing to the heart. What makes a target speak to the heart is rich and sensual language that tells vivid and compelling stories of the future as if the target had already been achieved.

This isn't magic. It's just our brain's RAS (reticular activating system) which is the part of the brain that decides what we give conscious attention to. Whatever turns your RAS on, is what your mind will obsess over. If you've got your RAS turned on to drinking 8 glasses of crystal clear, cool, cleansing, refreshing, sparkling water every day, then something changes. Your mind makes you notice water coolers when you walk past them, notice how many other people have glasses of water on their desks or in their hands, notice where you could get your next drink of water from, notice how dry and parched and desperate your mouth is for a sip.

Targets that stick to the old formula of “performance measure + target value + timeframe” leave people to the ways they have felt about targets in the past: bored, cynical, pessimistic, sarcastic. These are the emotions that *do not* fuel action toward target, that lead to misinterpretation of the target, that cause wasted effort pursuing the wrong results.

Targets that are told with vivid and sensual stories are targets that unleash emotions like anticipation, curiosity, excitement, desperation, impatience, passion and want. These are the emotions that move people toward targets (like the author toward chocolate).

targets must be believed to be seen

Deming says in his classic book *The New Economics*:

“How could there be life without aims and hopes? Everyone has aims, hopes, plans. But a goal that lies beyond the means of its accomplishment will lead to discouragement, frustration, demoralization. In other words, there must be a method to achieve an aim.”

It's funny, but beliefs are often more real to people than facts. It takes some very strong experiences and immersion in facts to shift our long-held beliefs. It is our beliefs and not data that drive our choices and behaviours. What we believe about the achievability of a target will more drive how we feel about pursuing it than the fact that it is written in our business plan.

Targets without any strategies or means for being achieved are targets that easily stimulate emotions of fear of failure, frustration, procrastination, confusion and overwhelm. Such emotions fizzle out the motivation (if it ever existed) and intention of



reaching the target. Early action is important to build and keep the momentum of progress. Otherwise, figures are fudged, every excuse under the sun is used to justify lack of progress, and problems are swept under the rug.

Targets that are iteratively designed with preliminary ideas about how to achieve them, with realist allocation of resources, are targets that will more likely stimulate emotions of trust, confidence, faith, curiosity, inquisitiveness. These emotions fuel action, and no worthy target can be achieved without action.

targets must be owned to be pursued

People must see themselves in the endeavors they pursue, or they won't put themselves into those endeavors. Targets imposed from on-high, set without the involvement of those that will pursue them, are targets doomed to fail. Yes it is important for people to work for the good of the organisation, but this can only happen if the organisation can work for the good of the people.

Targets that aren't owned by the people responsible for achieving them are targets that lead to fear of being blamed for results outside their control, stress from feeling pulled away from personal priorities, anger, resentment, humiliation. These emotions disempower people, and disempowered people can't perform. Little or no productive action happens to achieve the target.

When someone can see that by pursuing a target for the organisation, they personally will benefit from it too, there's hope. It's knowing the personal values of individuals that helps most here. The decision about who are the best people to pursue which targets is easier to make. And the decision about how to refine and tailor targets to accommodate people's personal goals along the way is also easier to make. This way, the emotions of pride, high self-esteem, passion, dignity and commitment are allowed to flourish, and they turbo-charge the progress toward target.

make space for emotion in your goals

Emotion is an uncomfortable thing to talk about (even think about) in business. And in part, this is because it has such a scary and large impact in business contexts when it swings to the negative end of the spectrum. Rather than try to ignore emotion or shut the lid on it, try using it to your advantage when you next set targets.

One idea is to use the formula "performance measure + target value + timeframe + vivid sensory-rich story" to express targets, and get everyone involved in building this expression. Practice using words that describe what you see, hear, feel – what your senses notice and detect. Read some poetry or listen to the words of songs on the radio. You'll start noticing how easily this language invokes images and sensations in your mind. Get that RAS working!

Another idea is to make targets personally relevant to those that will pursue them. Try getting to know the people a little better, to understand their personal goals for learning, development, career progression, relationships and so on. Encourage them to explore how the organisation's targets could help them with their personal aspirations.

If you appreciate that beliefs are often more real to people than facts, then you'll understand that people will pursue targets they believe they can achieve. This means they need to see a course of action that can be taken, inside of their control, that will lead to the target. They need to feel confident that there is enough time and support available to do this, too. Make sure you have a schedule of regular checkpoints to see how progress is going, to make sure enough resources are available, and to maintain the confidence and focus of the people working toward the target.

If you don't make space for emotion in your target setting, then you might be aiming too high - too high relative to the fuel you have available to reach that target. Positive emotions make commitment possible, and commitment is a fuel that offers very high mileage.

references

W. Edwards Deming, "The New Economics 2nd Edition", *The MIT Press*, 1994



about the author

Stacey Barr is a specialist in performance measurement, helping people to move their business or organisation's performance from where it is, to where they want it to be.

Sign up for Stacey's free email newsletter at www.staceybarr.com to receive your **complimentary copy of her e-book** "202 Tips for Performance Measurement".

