

Web-exclusive comment

When performance targets miss the mark

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Bull's-eye! Well, maybe not.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the federal department that handles first nations issues, told The Globe and Mail last week that the government had won a victory by settling 54 land claims in the fiscal year that ended yesterday. This beat the 12-month target of 50 set by former Indian Affairs minister Jim Prentice, and was miles ahead of the ministry's long-term average of settling 14 land claims a year.

Impressive? Not really. Historically, the average value of claims settled in a one-year period is \$64-million. The value of the 54 claims settled last year wasn't much higher. Indian Affairs beat its target by focusing on a large number of small claims. The typical settlement's value dropped from the historical average of \$3.8-million to \$1.4-million. Even Mr. Prentice's successor, Chuck Strahl, seemed to recognize that the numbers didn't add up, at least not in the usual way.

“You want to do the low-hanging fruit first, that's for sure. I certainly gave no instruction that way, but it wouldn't surprise me,” he said.

Nor should it have surprised him. Setting performance targets for public programs is often a fool's errand. So it's worrying that the Indian Affairs example typifies what's happening across the federal government, as the bureaucracy complies with a new requirement to establish performance targets.

Make no mistake: Departments should manage performance in ways that focus on benefits delivered to Canadians. But, with a few exceptions, target-setting isn't how to get there. Targets force organizations to obsess over quotas instead of pursuing meaningful social and economic objectives. Many serious public servants find this dishonest and distasteful, a waste of time and money.

The British government saw this in the late 1990s, when the sweeping introduction of targets frequently led to worse performance, rather than better. As a result, in 2003, the House of Commons public administration select committee was driven to ask, “Do targets actually deliver results?” Among the evidence heard by members:

An ophthalmic unit at an eye hospital cancelled 19,500 follow-up appointments in a six-month period to meet a target for seeing new patients. Twenty-five people lost their vision entirely as a result of the delayed follow-ups.

Hospitals met target times for admitting patients by describing stretchers in hallways as “beds on wheels” and calling corridors “preadmission units.”

In the school system, the impact of test-score targets was similar: “There was a clear incentive ... to put effort into those who were just below the target ... But actually if you had somebody who was massively below [the target], there wasn't much point in putting effort into that little boy or girl.”

The committee noted that targets “can never be substitutes for a ... clearly expressed strategy and set of priorities,” and that “delivering on targets seemed to have become more important than delivering on services.”

Other well-known hazards of public-service performance targets:

Groping in the dark. They are often set in the absence of good information about what constitutes a reasonable figure, and about the administrative effort that will have to be diverted from program delivery to monitoring.

Piling on. They provide cheap opportunities for opposition politicians, auditors-general and journalists to dump on the bureaucracy. Explanations about the limits of reducing complex questions of program delivery to a single number are less headline-grabbing than the plain fact of a missed target.

Cheating. When funding of program delivery is tied to invalid targets, is it surprising that public agencies manipulate or fabricate performance data to create an appearance that targets are being met?

Canadian public servants want to do good things. And they have become much better at measuring program performance and reporting on it to the public. But the introduction of one-dimensional performance targets that don't capture what public programs are all about puts public servants in straitjackets. This is bad for all of us.

Do we want our public servants to focus on social and economic progress, or do we want them to sweat over ill-conceived targets? As the British Commons committee put it: “Targets can be good servants, but they are poor masters.”

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