

WHITE PAPER

# Buy-in For KPI Targets

SETTING AND ACHIEVING  
PERFORMANCE TARGETS IS ABOUT THE  
HEART AND NOT JUST THE HEAD.



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STACEY BARR

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## Overview

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What's your target achieving track record? Do you reach most of your targets within their set timeframes, or do you find yourself throwing up all kinds of rationalisations 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.

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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 'measure + target value + timeframe' leave people bored, cynical, pessimistic, sarcastic."

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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, compulsion, impatience, passion and want. These are the emotions that move people toward targets (perhaps much like the author toward chocolate).

## Targets must be believed to be seen.

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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.”*

>> W. Edwards Deming

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

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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.

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People must see themselves in the endeavours they pursue, or they won't put themselves into those endeavours. 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.

"When someone can see that by pursuing a target for the organisation, they personally will benefit from it too, there's hope."

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

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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 permitted 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, getting 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!

"Use the formula  
'performance measure +  
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to express targets."

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

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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 emotional fuel everyone has 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition", *The MIT Press*, 1994

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### About Stacey Barr

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Stacey Barr is a globally recognised specialist in organisational performance measurement. She discovered that the struggles with measuring business performance are, surprisingly, universal. The biggest include hard-to-measure goals, trivial or meaningless measures, and no buy-in from people to measure and improve what matters. The root cause is a set of bad habits that have become common practice.

Stacey created PuMP®, a uniquely methodical and practical performance measurement approach. PuMP replaces the bad KPI habits with techniques that end the common KPI struggles. PuMP makes measuring performance faster, easier, engaging, and meaningful.

Stacey is author of [Practical Performance Measurement](#) and [Prove It!](#), publisher of the [Measure Up](#) blog, and her content appears on [Harvard Business Review's website](#) and in their acclaimed ManageMentor Program.

Discover more about Stacey and practical performance measurement at [www.staceybarr.com](http://www.staceybarr.com).



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