

I may have been dreaming..... but I'm sure I heard Patricia Hewitt – Minister for Trade and Industry – on the Radio 4 'Today' programme (4th July) utter some quite unbelievable words. I'm sure she said

'values are more important than targets'

I do not say that this is unbelievable because its wrong or misguided, but simply because it is such a change to hear a politician – particularly one from the managerialist tendency of the current administration – make such a perceptive remark.

Now, if one was being a teeny bit unkind, one could be cynical about the fact that 'values' have been rediscovered just in time to disguise the fact – or divert attention from the fact – that any number of targets that have been set in the past are now apparently in danger of not being met. This can be a tad embarrassing, particularly for an administration with such managerialist tendencies. So maybe it would be a good wheeze to re-discover our 'values', show that our heart is in the right place, and all will be well.

I leave it to readers to decide whether they are convinced of the 4th July performance of Ms Hewitt, and in particular of the position she was adopting. But for my money, there is FAR more truth – and far more social justice – in what she said than there is in the formerly ubiquitous policy of target setting.

For years we have been drenched in targets. The police have targets for reducing crime, and the health service have targets for reducing waiting lists and just about everything else. It is interesting that the Hewitt interview was almost exactly synchronised with the broadcast of the BBC Panorama programme that highlighted the effects – some very damaging – of targets in the health service. It's also interesting that Ms Hewitt's statement came with the authority of her position at the DTI rather than from any association with the DfES – where Charles Clarke shows every sign of great attachment to the business of targets.

Anyhow, another of the features of targets (we are told by the managerialist tendency) is that they have to be SMART. I can't remember what S.M.A.R.T stands for. It's some while since my last management course. But I think the M and the A stand for *measurable* and *attainable*.

This immediately raises questions not only about the kinds of things that can be targets (since some things are not measurable) but also about what the effects of such measurement will be, might be, or should be.

We know that schools have to be concerned with their A-C % passes at GCSE. They have a profound effect on league tables and on Ofsted judgments, and it is therefore not surprising that schools do all they can to elevate that % A-C rate. If I had managerialist tendencies and was responsible for examinations in a school, I might adopt the following tactic. I would set a 'mock' exam 6 months or 12 months ahead of the real thing, and this would provide me with a reasonable guide to who will get As Bs Cs Ds Es etc. I might then reasonably assume that with 'normal' teaching through the rest of the year, the ones that got As-Cs in the mock will be OK in the real thing.

It is the next step in the argument that is so dangerous.

If my aim is to have the greatest effect on the overall school result, then the logic would be to concentrate all the *extra* efforts on the D group, because they are the group that needs to be hotched-up over the line so that we get a few more of them to Cs. That way we can elevate our % 'pass' rate. Of course the associated argument is that to put extra effort into the group who got below D would be a less beneficial idea – since not many of them will get up to a C. So that group can just have the normal diet and take their chances. In short, I would be tempted to allocate teaching (and other resource) effort onto a small group of students; those who currently fall just below the line.

And this is ALWAYS what happens with target setting. Those responsible for trying to meet targets are forced to examine not just what needs to be improved – but what bits of the statistic are *easiest* to move. The morality of such a position is very tricky.

I first came across the word 'triage' when I took my son into the Accident & Emergency ward of our local hospital. The first person he met was a triage nurse, and her function – I understand – was to make an initial assessment of the urgency and seriousness of the case. Does this boy need immediate and drastic action – or can he wait for a couple of hours in A&E without coming to harm? I assume that the nursing staff used the triage system to allocate immediate priority to the most critical (ie life threatening) cases, and subordinated other cases to a lower priority.

I believe that the origin of triage nurses is Napoleonic. He used them in his field hospitals to separate the obviously dying (forget about them); from the seriously wounded but possible survivors (deal with them later); from the lightly wounded who can be got back to the field of battle (deal with them straight away). If you are a General

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intent on winning a battle, your priorities have to be to get (and keep) as many soldiers in action as you can.

And this demonstrates the ethical swamp that awaits those with managerialist tendencies. Suppose that our hospital is being rewarded – seriously rewarded – for reducing the waiting times in A&E. The triage system is a perfect vehicle for sorting cases in such a way that waiting times are reduced (for most patients). Top priority goes to those who can be got rid of immediately with a bit of sticking plaster; the 2nd priority is people who won't take more than 30 minutes or so to sort out; and the lowest priority goes to the serious cases that will take hours to resolve. A manager with those priorities could undoubtedly make serious cuts in the waiting time of A&E, and in the process get lots of brownie points for the hospital, and maybe even an OBE for services to the community. But by adopting such an approach to the target of reducing waiting times, the treatment policy would operate in exactly the inverse way that I assume our hospital currently uses. I really hope our hospital is not run by someone with managerialist tendencies.

Interestingly, the (Collins) dictionary defines 'triage' in the following terms... 'allocating limited resources on a basis of expediency rather than moral principle'. But enough of Napoleon and hospitals. Consider the following example – which I assure you is a fictionalised version of a real case.

A youngster was taken into a school at the end of KS4 with a distinctly dodgy set of GCSEs and an equally dodgy Record of Achievement, and he was launched into his AS courses (including design and technology). The school was very up to speed with its management systems and every student had a 'personal study plan' and a set of AS 'targets'. His 'target' for AS design and technology was an E. But he was good at design and technology, and the teacher couldn't understand why he had done so poorly at GCSE. The teacher was quite confident of a good result – well above the E. So why – I asked – is his target not an A ? Why is the school not giving this chap the message that he is really good – and can really excel. If self esteem is his problem (as it so often is) would this not give him a real lift as well as a challenge?

The reason of course (silly me – its obvious really) is that the department is rewarded for the extent to which the students all achieve their targets. So the teachers were happy that students should have low targets that provide meaningless, non-challenges, because in the end everyone is a winner. But I was left very

uneasy about this arrangement, and about the messages that the lad was taking from this charade.

So let's not be too cynical about Ms Hewitt's new-found doubts about targets and her declaration that values may be more important. Because I would like to believe that the values of the nurses and doctors in our local hospital would prevent them from distorting clinical judgments in favour of managerialist ones. And I would like to believe that all youngsters in schools are challenged to be the very best that they can be in design and technology (and everything else). And in both of these cases; damned targets make the job harder and more convoluted. I would rather trust the professional ethics of nurses doctors and teachers than I would the target scores of the managerialist tendency.

PS Prizes will be awarded to the best suggestion for the meaning of SMART.