THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE AND ROBUST TARGETS

Aither's ongoing work in program performance continues to highlight that the setting of effective and robust targets is critical for success.

A clear management and delivery framework is fundamental to success. Our Enhancing Program Performance Thought Piece highlighted that the 'plan-do-review' approach supports such a framework.

But robust targets are equally as important. Aither's ongoing work in program performance continues to highlight that effective targets are as critically important for such an approach to be successful. Effective targets ensure that there is:

- clarity about the outcome sought by the program
- a basis upon which to measure and demonstrate progress
- the ability to assess what mix of potential interventions will be most effective in making progress towards the target.

By adopting a simple and clear framework, many of the issues Aither often observes can be overcome. Terminology is important; goals, outcomes, outputs, targets and actions are all important components of an effective framework and should be used correctly and consistently.

Program managers should ensure a focus on outcomes rather than inputs and outputs – in a similar way that there is a need to prioritise asset management to deliver customer service rather than purely asset integrity. Outputs result from management tasks or work completed, such as a plan, a management agreement, or the construction of an asset. Outcomes are the measureable impact or change in condition that will be observed as a result of the investment.

Outcomes beyond the investment period should be considered goals or visions. While it is often difficult to define 'condition' in complex (especially natural) systems, it is critical to do so in order to measure and assess performance over time.

Program managers should consider adopting the tight-loose-tight model.

- 'Tight' targets are set
- Delivery remains flexible and 'loose' to adapt to inevitable variability in budgets, policy and priorities
- A final 'tight' component implementing an effective performance and evaluation framework where progress can be monitored and there is clear accountability.

Drawing from our latest international research, the table over page provides guidance on best practice attributes of effective targets.

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BEST PRACTICE ATTRIBUTES OF EFFECTIVE TARGETS

Success attribute	Brief description
Outcome focused and aligned with program logic	Distinguishing between outputs and outcomes, targets at a strategic or planning level should be focused on the intended outcome. This can be challenging to establish, but ultimately provides flexibility in delivery and a true basis for measuring progress towards a goal.
Clarity of purpose	Target language should be unambiguous and clear, avoiding terms that are open to individual interpretation or are otherwise undefined. The intent of the target (and its direct link to the program logic) should be clear and unassailable.
Concise and specific	Succinct and specific targets are easier to understand, communicate and report against. A small number of effective targets is much better than a broad range of targets that are poorly defined.
Supported by baseline data (referential)	Targets should be supported by effective datasets and a sound understanding of the starting point from which change is desired and can be measured.
Measurable in a transparent and cost-effective way	Measuring progress against targets should be feasible, pragmatic and cost-effective in order to facilitate transparent and timely reporting and performance monitoring.
Responsive indicators	Targets should be mindful and realistic about the change from investment or intervention that is feasible (and measurable) within the timeframe.
Delineate responsibilities	Where multiple agencies or stakeholders are contributing to an outcome target, roles and responsibilities should be clear and promote accountability. Within specific organisations, there should be clear responsibilities for data collection, analysis and reporting against targets, as well as an additional set of responsibilities for achieving targets flexibly.
Achievable and relevant	Avoid over-reaching for outcomes that cannot be achieved or demonstrated within the timeframe. While aspirational goals and visions are appropriate, unachievable targets result in a host of problems. Targets should be achievable and have direct relevance to the outcome sought at the strategic level.
Time-bound	Accountability is underpinned by a clear deadline for the target achievement. The timeframe for observable outcomes should be within the investment horizon.

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