

# Targets & Sustainability





GOODHART'S LAW

***“When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”***

— Charles Goodhart (via Strathern, 1997)

- **Hospital waiting times:** patients held in ambulances so they hadn't officially "arrived"
- **Call centre targets:** calls ended prematurely; problem "resolved" on the metric
- **Educational attainment:** teaching to the test, not developing understanding

In each case, the measure was sensible. The problem arose when people **optimised for the target** rather than the underlying goal.

# Designing Better Targets

- **Multiple measures:** balance different aspects so optimising one doesn't destroy another
- **Leading & lagging indicators:** track activities, not just outcomes
- **Qualitative alongside quantitative:** numbers say *what*; narrative says *why*
- **Beware perverse incentives:** ask “how could this be gamed?”
- **Review and adapt:** targets should evolve as understanding develops



SMART targets are a useful starting point, but a target can be perfectly SMART and still be bad for your business.



# Sustaining Change

- Key champions leave
- Competing priorities emerge
- Initial enthusiasm fades
- Systems revert to familiar patterns
- New leadership has different priorities

## Role modeling

“I see my leaders, colleagues, and staff behaving differently.”



## Understanding and conviction

“I understand what is being asked of me, and it makes sense.”



“I will change my mind-set and behavior if ...”

## Confidence and skill building

“I have the skills and opportunities to behave in the new way.”



## Reinforcement mechanisms

“I see that our structures, processes, and systems support the changes I am being asked to make.”



**The real test:**  
Would the consultant's absence reverse progress? If so, implementation isn't complete.



## **"Aren't we doomed to fail anyway?"**

**"The brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail."**

— Beer & Nohria (2000), *Harvard Business Review*

**✗ No evidence. No study. No data. No definition of “fail.”**

Hughes traced this through the literature: academic matryoshka dolls, each source citing another, all the way back to unsupported claims.

# Why the Myth Persists – and Why It's Dangerous

## Legitimation

Justifies consultant involvement: if change is so hard, you'd better hire experts

## Risk Management

Protects consultants when things go wrong: “we were always up against the odds”

## Expectation Setting

Prepares clients for difficulty, so moderate success looks impressive

## Selling

Creates demand for change management expertise. Fear sells

⚠ Notice who benefits from this narrative. Predominantly: **consulting firms**.

Based on Hughes (2011)

# The Nocebo Effect

In medicine, telling patients a treatment probably won't work makes outcomes genuinely worse. **Expectations shape reality.**

## The Consultant

Walks in having internalised “most of these fail.” Hedges. Protects themselves. Invests less fully – failure feels like the default.

## The Client Leader

Why champion a change if the odds are stacked against you? Why put your reputation on the line for something that “probably won’t work”?

## The Change Champions

Middle managers and team leads hear that change usually fails. The rational response: keep your head down and wait it out.

⚠ The 70% myth doesn't just describe failure – it **produces** it. It gives everyone involved permission to disengage.

# Summary: Three Pillars of Implementation

## Partnership over Dependency

Build client capability. Shift towards Navigator. Plan with the end in mind.

## Adaptive Planning

Diagnose tame vs wicked. Plan with humility. Hold the plan loosely.

## Honest Measurement

Set targets carefully. Watch for Goodhart's Law. Plan for sustainability from day one.

 Reject narratives that normalise failure – because **believing change will fail is one of the surest ways to make it so.**

 Think about a change you've experienced that didn't fully sustain. What factors contributed to the erosion? What might have helped it persist? Bring that example – and any reactions or questions from the videos and readings – to the live session.