

THE STRATEGY THAT REACHES THE FLOOR · CHAPTER THREE

The Number That Stood In

A number set alone, without its purpose and its pair, slowly takes the strategy's place.

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Santa Anna, A. (2026). The Number That Stood In. In The Strategy That Reaches the Floor (ch. 3). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989185
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Published by Luminous Prosperity Inc. for Haute Lumière. Author ORCID 0009-0008-3244-0306.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.23989185 · this record's page: business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-strategy-that-reaches-the-floor/03-the-number-that-stood-in/

Please cite as: Santa Anna, A. (2026). The Number That Stood In. In The Strategy That Reaches the Floor (ch. 3). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989185

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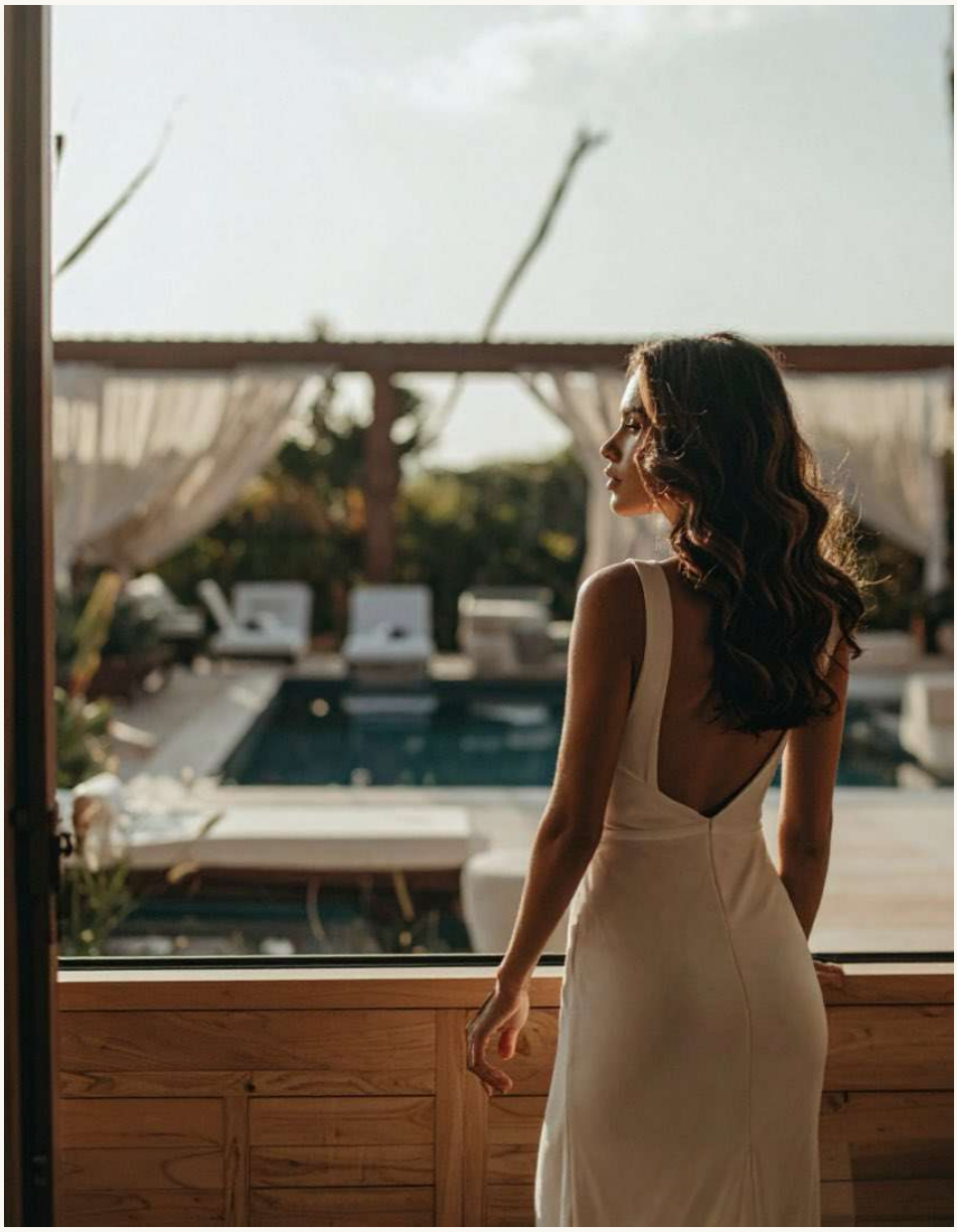
ABSTRACT

A number set alone, without its purpose and its pair, slowly takes the strategy's place. It is a quarter past four on a Friday, and the screen on the wall of the contact centre has just turned green. It shows one number for each team, the average time an adviser spends on a call, and for the first time this quarter the figure for her team is under the line. The team leader is standing at the end of the row with a lanyard in one hand and a list of the week's escalations in the other. Somebody further down the room claps, once, softly, and then stops, as if unsure whether it is allowed. Two desks away her most experienced adviser is still on a call. It has been running for thirty-eight minutes. On the other end is a man in his eighties whose broadband has failed for the third time in a month, and the adviser is talking him, slowly and kindly, through the back of his router, one cable at a time. At the start of the quarter the company's objective was printed at the top of every team's plan: customers who never have to call twice . The key result under it was the handling-time line.

CHAPTER THREE

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A quarter past four, the screen

It is a quarter past four on a Friday, and the screen on the wall of the contact centre has just turned green. It shows one number for each team, the average time an adviser spends on a call, and for the first time this quarter the figure for her team is under the line. The team leader is standing at the end of the row with a lanyard in one hand and a list of the week's escalations in the other. Somebody further down the room claps, once, softly, and then stops, as if unsure whether it is allowed.

Two desks away her most experienced adviser is still on a call. It has been running for thirty-eight minutes. On the other end is a man in his eighties whose broadband has failed for the third time in a month, and the adviser is talking him, slowly and kindly, through the back of his router, one cable at a time. At the start of the quarter the company's objective was printed at the top of every team's plan: *customers who never have to call twice*. The key result under it was the handling-time line. The team leader looks at the screen, then at the adviser, then at the escalation list, where she knows that four of this week's calls were transferred to another team at the nine-minute mark, and her chest goes tight in the particular way it does when two things she is responsible for point in opposite directions.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these afternoons are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Most people who have managed to a number have watched it turn green for the wrong reason.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has a sentence for the moment, written about a firm that measured everything well and was losing what mattered most.[20] "When you can only count certain things," it says, "those things become the things that count." The adviser's thirty-eight minutes will count against the team. The man in his eighties, who will not call again this month, will not be counted at all.

This chapter makes one claim. A strategy reaches the floor as a number, and that is right; but a number set alone, without the purpose beside it and without a second number to watch it, slowly takes the strategy's place. The gain lost here is not the gap between the target and the result. It is the gap between the result and the purpose, and most firms have no instrument that sees it.

Goals work

It would be easy, from the contact centre, to conclude that targets are the problem. The evidence says otherwise, and it deserves to be stated fairly first. In 2002 Edwin Locke and Gary Latham summarised thirty-five years of research on goal setting in the *American Psychologist*.[21] The core of it is one of the most replicated findings in the study of work: specific, difficult goals lead to higher performance than vague goals or the instruction to do one's best, across hundreds of studies, many settings and many countries. Goals direct attention, raise effort, increase persistence and prompt people to look for better ways of working. The authors were also explicit about the conditions: people need to be committed to the goal, to receive feedback on progress, to have the ability to reach it, and to face a task that does not overwhelm them.

That last condition matters for the contact centre, and Locke and Latham wrote about it themselves. When a task is complex and people do not yet know how to do it well, a demanding outcome goal can make performance worse, because it pushes people to try harder at a method that does not work. In 2005 Gerard Seijts and Latham set out the remedy: in such situations, set a specific, challenging learning goal instead, a goal to discover a number of effective ways of doing the work, and set the outcome goal later.[22] A learning goal draws attention away from the end result and toward the discovery of how to reach it.

So the theory, read whole, does not say *set a number and push*. It says set a number when people know how to reach it, and something else when they do not, and watch for what the number does not see. The contact centre's key result was set as if helping the man in his eighties were a simple task with a known method. It is not.

A warning label

In 2009 four researchers, Lisa Ordóñez, Maurice Schweitzer, Adam Galinsky and Max Bazerman, published an essay with a title designed to be remembered: *Goals Gone Wild*.[23] They argued that the benefits of goal setting had been overstated and its harms largely ignored, and they listed the side effects they saw: a narrow focus that neglects everything outside the goal, distorted attitudes to risk, a rise in unethical behaviour, inhibited learning, corrosion of culture and reduced intrinsic motivation. Goal setting, they wrote, should be treated less like an over-the-counter remedy and more like a prescription-strength medication, with careful dosing, close supervision and a warning label.

Locke and Latham replied in the same issue of the journal, and sharply.[24] They accused the critics of drawing their central theme from anecdote rather than research, of citing the literature unrepresentatively, of misreporting results and of using emotionally laden metaphors, and they pointed out that almost every pitfall listed had already been described in their own work. Both papers are essays in a management journal, not new studies, and a reader should hold the dispute as what it is: a disagreement between serious scholars about emphasis, not about the basic facts.

One of the studies at the centre of it is worth describing, because it is a careful experiment and its finding is specific. In 2004 Schweitzer, Ordóñez and Bambi Douma gave people a task in a laboratory and either a specific goal or the instruction to do their best, and then gave them the chance to misreport their own performance.[25] People with unmet goals were more likely to overstate what they had done than people asked to do their best, with or without a financial reward attached, and the effect was strongest among those who had fallen just short. It is one laboratory study, with students, on a simple task. What it shows is not that goals make people dishonest. It shows where the pressure gathers: at the line, among the people closest to it.

The four transfers at the nine-minute mark sit exactly there. Nobody in the team leader's row is lying. They are doing what the line rewards, at the point where the line is closest, and the canon describes the pattern without any accusation at all. Writing about why fear-based accountability produces the behaviour it is meant to prevent, it says that people "invest energy in managing the *appearance* of performance rather than the reality of it — producing impressive reports, hitting narrow metrics, and performing competence while the actual work suffers from the attention diverted to self-protection."



Targets and terror

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Targets and terror

The largest natural experiment in governing by numbers took place in the English public health service in the 2000s, and it was studied closely. In 2006 Gwyn Bevan and Christopher Hood published an analysis with a title that is also a summary: *What's measured is what matters.*[26] The government of the day had combined targets with what they called an element of terror, published rankings and real consequences for managers who missed. Bevan and Hood drew the parallel with the Soviet planning regime, which was initially successful and then collapsed, and they named the two assumptions such a system rests on. The first

is synecdoche, taking a part to stand for the whole: a waiting time standing for the quality of care. The second is that problems of measurement and gaming do not matter. Their evidence, drawn from reported successes, measurement problems and documented gaming, showed that both assumptions were fragile.

The study is careful to say that targets produced real improvements as well as gaming, and it should not be read as an argument against measurement. Its lasting contribution is the word synecdoche, because it names exactly what happens on the contact centre's wall. The handling-time figure is a part. The objective, customers who never have to call twice, is the whole. For the first weeks of the quarter the part and the whole moved together, because shorter calls often meant better-trained advisers. Then they separated, and the part kept going.

Steven Kerr had described the general case in 1975, in a paper whose title has entered the language: *On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B*.[27] Organisations, he showed with examples from many settings, routinely reward one behaviour while hoping for another, and are then surprised to get the behaviour they rewarded. Santa Anna's canon, describing a technology firm that had invested heavily in a sophisticated goal framework, puts the end state in three short sentences: "Meridian had optimized itself into hollowness. The metrics were excellent. The soul was departing."

What the number cannot carry

There is a reason the separation is so hard to see from above, and the canon is precise about it. Writing of the framework the contact centre was using, objectives and key results, it gives the method its due and then names its limit: it "reinforced the assumption that what matters can be expressed as a measurable outcome within a defined timeframe — an assumption that works beautifully for product launches and revenue targets but poorly for relational trust, ethical development, creative incubation, and the slow, non-linear work of organizational culture change." A thirty-eight-minute call with a man in his eighties is relational trust. The method can count its length. It cannot count what it bought.

The practitioners who popularised the framework knew this, and said so. Andrew Grove, who built the method at Intel and described it in *High Output Management* (1983), argued that indicators should be paired, so that a measure of an effect is always watched beside a measure of its counter-effect: a measure of speed beside a measure of quality, a measure of stock levels beside a measure of shortages.[28] John Doerr, who carried the method to Google and wrote *Measure What Matters* (2018), drew a distinction between committed key results, which a team is expected to meet in full, and aspirational ones, set high on purpose, where falling short is expected and is not a failure.[29] Both points are summarised here from the books, not reopened for this book. Both are routinely lost when the method is adopted, because the single number fits on a screen and the pair does not.

The house has written about why [a number set beside a name is heard as a verdict]({{BOOK:rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt}}), and about the trouble with [a goal asked to carry a person's worth]

({{BOOK:rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence}}). The contact centre adds the organisational version. A key result asked to carry the whole of a strategy will be met, and the strategy will not.

Thirty-eight minutes

Go back to the adviser at the second desk, because she is the person the number is most likely to lose. She is not slow. She is the one the others ask when a customer's equipment will not behave, and the one who stays on the line until it does. Every long call she takes to fix a fault properly pushes her own figure up and her team's figure with it, and every Friday the screen tells her, in a colour, that she is part of the problem. Nobody has said so. Nobody needs to.

The canon describes what that does to a person, in a passage from the same book on performance systems, and it is worth reading slowly:

> *When a person's full contribution is systematically reduced to a set of metrics that capture only a fraction of what they bring, the body registers the incongruence. There is a specific somatic signature to this experience — a tightening in the chest, a constriction in the throat, a heaviness in the shoulders. It is the body's way of saying: I am more than this. What I offer is not being received. Something essential about me is being made invisible.*

The organisational consequence follows quietly. The best adviser either learns to transfer the hard calls at the nine-minute mark, like everyone else, or she leaves for a firm that does not count her this way, and takes with her the knowledge of how to fix a router over the phone for a man in his eighties. Either way the firm has lost the thing its objective was asking for, and the screen will record the loss as an improvement.

The canon puts the general rule in a sentence that turns a familiar management saying round. The maxim *what gets measured gets managed*, it says, "contains a shadow that is rarely acknowledged: what does not get measured does not get managed — and often ceases to be valued at all." It adds the consequence for every firm that prints its values on a wall and pays for something else: "if the performance system rewards individual output, speed, and compliance, the posters are wallpaper." The objective at the top of the contact centre's plan is, at this moment, wallpaper.

None of this is an argument for removing the number. A contact centre that does not know how long its calls take cannot staff its shifts, and a firm that cannot see its handling time will not notice when a new system makes every call slower. The argument is narrower and more useful. A number set alone will drift toward what it can see. The task is to set it so that it cannot drift without someone noticing.



The people just short of the line

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The people just short of the line

There is one more finding to carry from the research into the contact centre, and it concerns where on the wall the pressure falls. Schweitzer, Ordóñez and Douma found that the people most likely to overstate their performance were not the ones far from the goal but the ones just short of it. Read beside the wall, that is a precise prediction. The advisers whose figures sit a few seconds above the line in the last week of the quarter are under more pressure than anyone else in the room, and the four transfers at the nine-minute mark came from three of them.

The finding suggests that a firm worried about gaming should look not at its worst performers but at the band just below the target, and at the last weeks before a target is assessed. It also suggests something about the design of the target itself. A single line, with a reward or a reprimand on either side of it, concentrates the pressure in exactly the place it does most harm. A range, or a direction of travel, or a learning goal for work nobody yet knows how to do well, spreads it out.

Bevan and Hood's study points the same way at the scale of a national health service. Where consequences for managers were tied to whether a single threshold was met, the threshold itself became the thing that was managed. The lesson they drew was not to abandon targets but to audit them, and to watch for the behaviour that a threshold invites.

None of this requires anyone in the contact centre to be suspected of anything. The advisers just short of the line are, for the most part, doing their honest best under a design that leaves them one move to make. The team leader does not need to watch them more closely. She needs a design in which the move that helps the man in his eighties is also the move that counts.

The pair on the page

Picture the team leader doing it differently in the next quarter. Before the targets are set, her manager asks every team leader to bring one page for each key result, and the page has four lines on it.

The first line is the purpose, in a sentence a new adviser would understand, copied from the objective: customers who never have to call twice. The second is the key result itself, and beside it whether it is committed or aspirational, decided out loud. The third is the paired measure, the number that would rise if the key result were met in the wrong way. For handling time it is easy to find, because the firm already keeps it: the share of customers who call again within seven days about the same fault. The fourth line is a sentence beginning *we will not*: we will not transfer a call to protect the time; we will not end a call before the fault is fixed.

The order of what happens next matters more than the page. The two numbers go on the wall together, the same size, in the same colour, so that nobody can celebrate one without seeing the other. The team leader reviews them as a pair each week, and the first question in the review is not whether the line was met but whether the two moved together. And for the part of the work where nobody yet knows the best method, the long calls with customers who struggle with the equipment, she sets a learning goal in place of an outcome goal, as Seijts and Latham describe: by the end of the month, the team will have found and written down three ways of shortening a router call without leaving the customer to call back. Her most experienced adviser is asked to lead it.

There are failure modes, and they are predictable. The paired measure is chosen because it is easy to improve, not because it would expose the key result. The *we will not* line is written and never read again. The

pair is reviewed, but only the first number is reported upward, so that the second becomes a local matter. And an aspirational result is quietly treated as committed in the year-end review, which teaches everyone to stop setting aspirational ones. Chapter 7 carries the run sheet for this practice, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days.

The gain in this is unusually easy to see, once the pair is on the wall. Every customer who calls twice costs the firm a second call, often a third, and sometimes the customer. Those costs were always in the firm's records, in a different team's report. The pair moves them onto the same wall as the target that was producing them. The difference between the cost of repeat calls before the pair and after it is a gain found, and because both numbers come from records the firm already keeps, it can be measured in a way [both sides could sign]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}). The earlier problem in this series, a target that is never allowed to travel back up (Chapter 2), is where the pair should be agreed; and the place it will be read, or not, is the quarterly review that reports in colours (Chapter 4).

Setting the pair in your own building

The article this chapter began as followed one team and one key result. The book can go further, into the finer points of setting paired measures across a set of objectives, and the first of them is finding the second number.

The paired measure is the number that would rise if the first were met in the wrong way. The way to find it is to ask, of each key result, a plain question: *if a sensible, tired person wanted to hit this number without doing what it is for, what would they do?* Then ask what record would show it. For handling time it is repeat calls. For a sales target it is often returns, discounts or cancellations in the following quarter. For a cost target it is often overtime, agency spending or quality faults that appear later and elsewhere. For a delivery date it is rework after the date. In almost every case the second number already exists in the organisation's records, usually in a different team's report. The work is to move it onto the same page as the first.

The second finer point is that the pair is chosen before anyone knows how the quarter will go. A second number added after the first has gone green is an accusation; the same number agreed in advance is a design. The pair, and the line beginning *we will not*, should be written on the same day as the key result and signed by the person who will be held to it.

The third is choosing the kind of goal. Every key result should be marked, out loud, as one of three kinds. A committed result is expected to be met in full, and the team is asked to say early if it will not be. An aspirational result is set high on purpose, and falling short is not a failure. And a learning goal, in the sense Seijts and Latham describe, is set where the team does not yet know how to do the work well: its aim is to find and write down a number of ways that work, and the outcome target comes later. Most failures of the method begin with a learning goal dressed as a committed result. The contact centre's handling time for complex calls was such a case.

The fourth is the review of the pair. The two numbers are reviewed together, every week or every month, and the first question is always whether they moved together. If the first improves and the second worsens, the improvement is not yet a gain, and the team's job is to find out why before anyone celebrates. If both improve, it probably is. If the first worsens and the second improves, the team may have found something that matters more than the target, and the target itself may need to change.

The fifth is the band just short of the line. The research described in this chapter suggests that the pressure to game a target gathers among the people just below it, in the last weeks before it is assessed. A leader can design for this without suspecting anybody. Reviewing progress as a direction of travel rather than a single crossing, avoiding consequences that turn on one threshold, and paying particular attention to the second number in the last weeks of a period all spread the pressure out.

The sixth is how many key results there are. A team with twelve key results cannot hold twelve pairs, and in practice will watch the three that are reviewed most often. Fewer is better: three or four objectives, each with two or three key results, each with its pair. The house's reading of the method in the Luminous 100 warns against cascading it mechanically down the organisation, and the practical form of that warning is to let each team write its own key results against the objective above, through the catchball of Chapter 2, rather than inherit a share of the number.

And the decision that most changes the result is what happens when the pair disagrees for the first time. If the leader treats a falling first number and a rising second as a problem with the second number, the pair is over. If she treats it as the most useful information the quarter has produced, and asks the team what it means, the pair will last. Chapter 6 places the pairing in the second month of a ninety-day plan, after the targets have travelled back up, and Chapter 7 gives the pair page, the question for finding the second number and the choice of goal as working pages.

A quarter past four, the next quarter

It is a quarter past four on a Friday, three months later, and there are two numbers on the screen for each team. The first is the handling time, which is a little above the line. The second is the share of customers who called back within the week, which has fallen for the ninth week running. Nobody claps. The team leader notices that two of her advisers have stopped at the end of the row to look at the second number, which they never did with the first.

Two desks away her most experienced adviser is on a call. It has been running for twenty minutes. On the wall beside her desk, pinned at eye level, is a page with three ways of shortening a router call written on it in her own hand.

The screen is green on one side and green on the other, and this time it means something.

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