

Beware milestones

Having convinced you to improve your measurement of what really matters in your organisation so that you can make better decisions, I must provide a word of caution. Sometimes when we introduce new measures we actually hurt decision making. Take the effect that milestones have on people.

Milestones as the name infers are solid markers of progress on a journey. You have either made the milestone or you have fallen short. There is no better example of the effect of milestones on decision making than from sport.

Take the game of cricket. If you don't know cricket all you need to focus in on is one number, 100. That number represents a century of runs by a batsman in one innings and is a massive milestone. Careers are judged on the number of centuries a batsman scores.

A batsman plays the game to score runs by hitting a ball sent toward him at varying speeds of up to 100.2 miles per hour (161.3 kilometres per hour) by a bowler from 22 yards (20 metres) away. The 100.2 mph delivery, officially the fastest ball ever recorded, was delivered by Shoaib Akhtar of Pakistan. Shoaib was nicknamed the Rawalpindi Express!

Needless to say, scoring runs is not dead easy. A great batting average in cricket at the highest levels is 40 plus and you are among the elite when you have an average over 50. Then there is Australia's great Don Bradman who had an average of 99.94 with his next nearest rivals being South Africa's Graeme Pollock with 60.97 and England's Herb Sutcliffe with 60.63. Bradman was truly a master batsman.

At the other end of the spectrum are the non-specialist batsmen, the bowlers that are required to bat, just like pitchers in the National League in US baseball, except you can't substitute them out for a good batsman just when you need one. The batting average for your typical number 11 batsman is less than 10 runs.

Now take yourself to the 2013 Ashes Tour of England by the Australian cricket team. Enter one Ashton Agar, a 19-year-old bowler who could "bat a bit". He makes his debut for Australia against England in the first test match of a five-test series. Agar is slotted in the number-11 batting position. England don't perform well in their first innings (of two) and the Australian team members are feeling pretty good about themselves. Then disaster strikes, Australia loses nine of 10 wickets and they have barely made half the runs England made. Agar walks onto the field and starts scoring runs immediately and almost at will. Together with regular batsman, the late Phil Hughes, they build a partnership that takes the score well past England's score. Before you knew it, with the greatest of ease, Ashton was approaching the milestone all cricketers strive for, to score a century, 100 runs in one innings.

What happened next was the strongest evidence you will ever need of the dangers of milestones. Agar had already achieved massive success. He had already scored more runs by a number-11 batsman than ever before in over 120 years of test cricket. He and Phil Hughes now had the highest partnership for the last wicket of an innings. Agar had helped

save his team in the all-important first test. However, he could see that milestone looming, a century. Not just any century, a century on debut, an even more significant milestone, and a century by a number-11 batsman!

People who follow cricket are well aware of the saying “the nervous nineties”. It was palpable. The free scoring Agar tensed up. He scored one run in the 62nd over, one in the 63rd and edged nervously for three runs in the 64th, he was then four runs from glory. On the second ball of the 65th over he defended again for a comfortable two runs. He was just two runs away from glory. Here is how the ESPN Cricinfo website commentator called it for online followers:¹

64.3

Broad to Agar, no run, back of a length down the leg side, swings at it and misses

64.4

Broad to Agar, no run, short again, wafts at it trying to force it down to third man past gully but missed

64.5

Broad to Agar, OUT, back of a length, pulled and ... got him! Oh no, caught in the deep.

A miscue aiming to the midwicket boundary but didn't get it and Graeme Swann came in and took a low catch. He came so close, having played so well, but Agar has fallen just short of an historical century but it's still the highest test score by a no. 11

For those watching live as I was, you could see how his behaviour had changed. He, the commentators and I were all left at best flat, and at worst distraught.

You may be thinking, he was young and inexperienced, of course he became anxious. If he was a 10-year veteran he would have been okay. Well I have two examples to dispel that truth.

One is the great Indian cricket batsman Sachin Tendulkar. In fact, many would say he was the greatest, even better than Don Bradman. Although Tendulkar never reached a batting average anywhere near Bradman's he did have other amazing achievements. After 52 tests, the same number as Bradman played in his career, which was interrupted by World War II, Tendulkar was² averaging 49.77 runs compared with Bradman's 99.94. Tendulkar reached a career-high of 58.46 after 103 tests. While the numbers show a big gap between the two players, Tendulkar played in a different era, an era that included one-day international (ODI) cricket. His career consisted of 200 test matches and 463 one-day internationals and ran from November 1989 until November 2013, some 24 years. A truly remarkable career. Most remarkably, he scored 100 centuries across the two forms

¹ From: <http://www.espncricinfo.com/the-ashes-2013/engine/match/566932.html?innings=1;view=commentary>

of the game. He scored 51 test hundreds and 49 ODI hundreds. So how can a man with so much experience, with so much already achieved, feel milestone pressure?

In January 2011, Tendulkar scored the last of his 51 test centuries to leave him on 97 hundreds across both forms of the game. By mid-March he had scored two more ODI centuries. With the pressure of the milestone and the fear his skills were waning ever so slightly as each month passed, it took the great man another year and 13 attempts before he finally made a century of centuries on March 16, 2012.

Another example to show that age and experience are not the big determinants of those who feel the pressure of a milestone and those who do not, is from the career of the great US golfer Tom Watson. This example highlights that a key determinant is how important the milestone is to a person. Watson first played on the PGA Tour in 1968. His last full year on tour was in 1999, although he has played in PGA events every year since. He has had 39 tour wins, including eight major championship wins between 1975 and 1983. He is ranked sixth on the PGA all-time list of major champions.

At the 2009 British Open at Turnberry in Scotland, at the age of 59, Watson was teed up to compete to win his ninth major and the Claret Jug for the sixth time. He knew the course, he had won the championship there in 1977. Surely he didn't have high expectations. After the first round he was tied second, after the second round he was tied first, after the third round he was the leader by one shot. I can't capture the drama of the finishing holes in words here, you will have to go online for that.² It was captivating. Watson had about a nine-foot putt on the 18th to win. All I can say is that he probably didn't hit a worse putt on any of the preceding 71 holes played over four days. If you have played the game seriously you will know what pressure can do to your golf swing and your putting stroke. The pressure of hitting the milestone, of becoming the oldest winner ever of a major was too much, even for an experienced veteran. He went on to lose to Stewart Cink in a four-hole play-off by six shots!

Even worse, you may find you have a Nick Leeson on your hands. Leeson was a rogue trader who reportedly single-handedly brought down Barings Bank in 1995. Barings was the UK's oldest investment bank dating back to the 18th century. Remember, not every fraudster has to be a financial trader. They just need intent and they will find a way to make the numbers to earn the recognition they are seeking. It is not always money. It can be kudos, for example. Think of academic Rusi Taleyarkhan who claimed to have effectively created tabletop nuclear fusion,³ which implied a potentially boundless source of cheap energy. In 2008, he was found guilty of misconduct by a committee established by his employers, Purdue University, for deliberately misleading others about the research.

The next time you are thinking about setting targets, think how an employee will feel when they reach 98 out of 100 for a bonus target. Score 100, they get a bonus. Score 98, they get nothing, zip. Think of the decisions you are tempting some people to make. People start thinking, how can I game the system to score the extra two points I need? They may

² See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Oao-M3wx8Y

drop the margin in a proposal or a sales offer to get the sale before the bonus KPI cut-off date. Had they not had the pressure, they may well have cut a better deal a week or two later.

Beware of milestones because of the change in behaviour they may create in some people – people who have drivers that create blockers to sound decision making. Drivers like greed and ego, or the desire to be seen as the best or simply just better.