Target Fixation
When getting there at any cost becomes the only option

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When the going gets tough, our minds can play tricks on us, creating unexpected spots of selective mental blindness. The following article discusses the phenomenon of target fixation, how it manifests, how it affects us, and possible strategies to combat it.

When fighter jets approach an aircraft carrier, the pilot is required to land a 24 tonne (26.46 U.S. ton) machine on a runway which is a mere 150 m (492 feet) long by 20 m (65.6 feet) wide, often during bad weather, in strong crosswinds, or at night on a ship that is also moving at 30 knots. The arresting wire slows down the aircraft from 240 km/h (149 mph) to zero within two seconds [and on a landing area of roughly 100 m (328 feet)]. The men and women flying these multimillion dollar machines are highly trained and competent. In order to assist the pilots, there are multiple visual and aural guidance systems, aiming to ensure correct approach to the flight deck.

However, despite all these precautions, accidents occur, particularly when pilots approach too low, resulting in the aircraft ramming the stern of the ship. Why does this happen? Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as *target fixation*. It describes situations in which a person is severely stressed, scared, or overloaded, subsequently fixating on the target he or she is attempting to reach and blocking out the intermediate steps of how to get from here to there. This can lead to blind spots or blackouts, which results in an accident, regardless of the precautions taken.

Another example of target fixation would be the Fisher and Hall expeditions to Mount Everest of 1996, a tragic event revisited in Baltasar Kormákur's film *Everest* (2015). Scott Fisher and Rob Hall were both very experienced mountain guides whose companies enabled paying tourists to achieve the summit of Mount Everest. A fatal chain of events, involving, among other things, financial pressure, severe weather, and a disregard of their own safety protocols, led to Fisher, Hall, and a further six of their clients perishing on the high slopes of Everest (as well as several other climbers having to be rescued with severe injuries).

But let's take a step back. How could two competent and experienced operators have made such bad calls? A central reason seems to have been that Hall went against his gut feeling in an effort to assist his clients to reach the summit, despite having passed the defined turnaround time, (after which he should have returned to the relative safety of the advanced base camp). Fisher, it would appear, followed Hall's example.

The more people have invested in an enterprise, the more susceptible they are to becoming fixed on a target.

For professional arborists, in order to dismantle a tree, a crew may have decided to install a speed line. In this example, the installation is both equipment- and time-intensive. But once the crew starts speed-lining pieces out of the canopy, it becomes apparent that it is not possible to sufficiently tension the line to clear an obstacle below. In a case of target fixation, the crew, stressed by the tree owner looking on skeptically, might decide to launch a really big piece into the line to make up for lost time

(despite the warning signs). This could lead to a system failure (e.g., an anchor point failure).

Similar to how a Navy pilot might fly into the stern of the carrier, the arborist crew, in this example, were so fixated on getting the limb from the canopy to the ground that they blanked out the in-between steps. In such an instance, it can be helpful to define turnaround points: If we have not achieved the result X by point Y, let us consider alternative courses of action. If the first reasonably sized piece does not clear all the obstacles, let us explain to the owner what the issue is and examine the alternatives.

Target fixation has a number of symptoms:
- The operator has determined that the target shall be attained at any cost.
- The prudence of a task it not questioned, even when difficulties start to accumulate.
- Overly aggressive phrases are increasingly used (e.g., "This is how we have always done this," "If it has been good enough for the past ten years, it's good enough for now," or "End of discussion."). These phrases exclude any further discussion.
- Alternative routes of action are not considered.
- Danger is downplayed, and risks are accepted that would not usually be.

A further factor conducive to target fixation is planning optimism. When the job was priced, the sales person based his or her price on the assumption that all would go as well and smoothly as possible—that the A team would be on the job and that the weather would be perfect. Yet on the day of the job, the opposite happens: not everything went smoothly, the B team was sent out, and it was raining.

If this happens, perception can become selective, and indicators of things going wrong are liable to be ignored. When that happens, a type of groupthink tends to set in, where competent operators influence each other's poor behavior and poor decision-making (e.g., "The others were doing the same, so I thought it would probably be ok.").

Defusing Target Fixation

What strategies are available or are best suited to defusing a target-fixated situation? For starters, one must understand how and when it occurs: the closer one gets to a target, the higher the risk-acceptance becomes. This is because the target is almost within reach, and one has already invested a considerable amount of time and effort toward obtaining it. Sometimes, a controlled emergency landing is better than a crash landing. For our arborist example, in case of having misjudged the size of the limb being lowered in the rigging system, it may be better to let the piece run and smash the marble fountain below rather than to risk compromising the climber's anchor point by suddenly decelerating the limb.

Also, observe your inner dialogue. Pay attention to the warning signs! Defining and observing turnaround points keeps you open to alternative plans of action. And keep an eye on the risks, bearing worst-case scenarios in mind.

Check lists, documentation, and encouraging and practicing a good communication culture are central to preventing teams from becoming trapped in situations in which the target becomes the primary and only consideration—situations when all else gets blanked out. Give it a name—target fixation—and learn to recognize it; know the value of defusing the situation by taking another route to get there.

Next steps: Think about a time when you had target fixation (possibly not even at work). What could you have done differently? Talk with your crew about how you can best communicate when this happens. **A•N**