What Do We Measure and Why? Questions About The Uses of Measurement

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Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers

And still they come, new from those
nations to which the study of that
which can be weighed and measured
is a consuming love.
W.H. Auden

We live in a culture that is crazy about numbers. We seek standardization, we revere precision, and we aspire for control. The very ancient and dominant belief of Western culture is that numbers are what is real. If you can number it, you make it real. Once made real, it's yours to manage and control. We increasingly depend on numbers to know how we are doing for virtually everything. We ascertain our health with numbers. How many calories or grams should I eat? What's my cholesterol reading? We assess one another with numbers. What's your I.Q.? What's your GPA? Your Emotional Intelligence? And of course we judge organizational viability only with numbers. What's the customer satisfaction rating? Inventory turns? ROI? P/E ratio?

It is numbers and only numbers that define and make visible what is real. This is the "hard stuff," the real world of management- graphs, charts, indices, ratios. Everyone knows that "you can only manage what you can measure." The work of modern managers is to interpret and manipulate these numeric views of reality. The desire to be good managers has compelled many people to become earnest students of measurement. But are measures and numbers the right pursuit? Do the right measures make for better managers? Do they make for stellar organizations?

As we look into the future of measurement, we want to pause for a moment and question this number mania. We'd like you to consider this question. What are the problems in organizations for which we assume measures are the solution?

Assumedly, most managers want reliable, high quality work. They want commitment, focus, teamwork, learning, and quality. They want people to pay attention to those things that contribute to performance.

If you agree that these are the general attributes and behaviors you're seeking, we'd like to ask whether, in your experience, you have been able to find measures that *sustain* these strong and important behaviors over time. Or if you haven't succeeded at finding them yet, are you still hopeful that you *will* find the right measures? Do you still believe in the power of measures

to elicit these performance qualities?

We believe that these behaviors are never produced by measurement. They are performance capabilities that emerge as people feel connected to their work and to each other. They are capacities that emerge as colleagues develop a shared sense of what they hope to create together, and as they operate in an environment where everyone feels welcome to contribute to that shared hope. Each of these qualities and behaviors-commitment, focus, teamwork, learning, quality--is a choice that people make. Depending on how connected they feel to the organization or team, they choose to pay attention, to take responsibility, to innovate, to learn and share their learnings. People can't be punished or paid into these behaviors. Either they are contributed or withheld by individuals as *they choose* whether and how they will work with us.

But to look at prevailing organizational practice, most managers seem consistently to choose measurement as the route to these capacities. They agonize to find the right reward that can be tied to the right measure. How long has been the search for the rewards that will lead to better teamwork or to more innovation? And haven't we yet learned that any measure or reward only works as an incentive in the short term, if at all. Ironically, the longer we try to garner these behaviors through measurement and reward, the more damage we do to the quality of our relationships, and the more we trivialize the meaning of work. Far too many organizations have lost the path to quality because they have burdened themselves with unending measures. How many employees have become experts at playing "the numbers game" to satisfy bosses rather than becoming experts at their jobs? The path of measurement can lead us dangerously far from the organizational qualities and behaviors that we require.

But measurement is critical. It can provide something that is essential to sustenance and growth: feedback. All life thrives on feedback and dies without it. We have to know what is going on around us, how our actions impact others, how the environment is changing, how we're changing. If we don't have access to this kind of information, we can't adapt or grow. Without feedback, we shrivel into routines and develop hard shells that keep newness out. We don't survive for long.

In any living system, feedback differs from measurement in several significant ways:

1. Feedback is self-generated. An individual or system notices whatever they determine is important for them. They ignore everything else.

2. Feedback depends on context. The critical information is being generated right now. Failing to notice the "now," or staying stuck in past assumptions, is very dangerous.

3. Feedback changes. What an individual or system chooses to notice will change depending on the past, the present, and the future. Looking for information only within rigid categories leads to blindness, which is also dangerous.

4. New and surprising information can get in. The boundaries are permeable.

5. Feedback is life-sustaining. It provides essential information about how to maintain

one's existence. It also indicates when adaptation and growth are necessary.

6. Feedback supports movement toward fitness. Through the constant exchange of feedback, the individual and its environment coevolve towards mutual sustainability.

As we reflect on the capacities that feedback can provide, it seems we are seeking many similar attributes in our organizations. But we haven't replicated the same processes, and therefore we can't achieve the same outcomes. There are some critical distinctions between feedback and measurement, as evident in the following contrasts.

Some Important Distinctions

Feedback	Measurement
Context dependent	One size fits all
Self-determined; the system choose what to notice	Imposed. Criteria are established externally.
Information accepted from anywhere	Information in fixed categories only
System creates own meaning	Meaning is pre-determined
Newness, surprise are essential	Prediction, routine are valued
Focus on adaptability and growth	Focus on stability and control
Meaning evolves	Meaning remains static
System co-adapts	System adapts to the measures

If we understand the critical role played by feedback in living systems, and contemplate these distinctions, we could develop measurement processes that support the behaviors and capacities we require, those that enhance the vitality and adaptability of the organization. To create measures that more resemble feedback, we suggest the following questions. We use them as design criteria for any measure or measurement process:

Who gets to create the measures? Measures are meaningful and important only when generated by those doing the work. Any group can benefit from others' experience and from experts, but the final measures need to be their creation. People only support what they create, and those closest to the work know a great deal about what is significant to measure.

How will we measure our measures? How can we keep measures useful and current? What will indicate that they are now obsolete? How will we keep abreast of changes in context that warrant new measures? Who will look for the unintended consequences that accompany any process and feed that information back to us?

Are we designing measures that are permeable rather than rigid? Are they open enough? Do they invite in newness and surprise? Do they encourage people to look in new places, or to see with new eyes?

Will these measures create information that increases our capacity to develop, to grow into the purpose of this organization? Will this particular information help individuals, teams, and the entire organization grow in the right direction? Will this information help us to deepen and expand the meaning of our work?

What measures will inform us about critical capacities: commitment, learning, teamwork, quality and innovation? How will we measure these essential behaviors without destroying them through the assessment process? Do these measures honor and support the relationships and meaning-rich environments that give rise to these behaviors?

If these questions seem daunting, we assure you they are not difficult to implement. But they do require extraordinary levels of participation-defining and using measures becomes everyone's responsibility. We've known teams, manufacturing plants, and service organizations where everyone knew that measurement was critical to their success, and went at the task of measuring with great enthusiasm and creativity. They were aggressive about seeking information from anywhere that might contribute to those purposes they had defined as most important to their organization, such things as safety, team-based organization, or social responsibility. Their process was creative, experimental, and the measures they developed were often non-traditional. People stretched and struggled to find ways to measure qualitative aspects of work. They developed unique and complex multivariate formulas that would work for a while and then be replaced by new ones. They understood that the right measurements gave them access to the information they needed to prosper and grow. But what was "right" kept changing. And in contrast to most organizations, measurement felt alive and vital in these work environments. It wasn't a constraint or deadening weight; rather it helped people accomplish what they wanted to accomplish. It provided feedback, the information necessary for them to adapt and thrive.

Being in these workplaces, we also learned that measurement needs to serve the deepest purposes of work. It is only when we connect at the level of purpose that we willingly offer ourselves to the organization. When we have connected to the possibilities of what we might create together, then we want to gather information that will help us be better contributors.

But in too many organizations, just the reverse happens. The measures define what is meaningful rather than letting the greater meaning of the work define the measures. As the focus narrows, people disconnect from any larger purpose, and only do what is required of them. They become focused on meeting the petty requirements of measurement, and

eventually, they die on the job. They have been cut off from the deep well-springs of purpose which are the source of the motivation to do good work.

If we look closely at our experience of the past few years, it is clear that as a management culture, we have succeeded at developing finer and more sophisticated measures. But has this sophistication at managing by the numbers led to the levels of performance or commitment we've been seeking? And if we have achieved good results in these areas, was it because we discovered the right measures, or was something else going on in the life of the organization?

We would like to dethrone measurement from its godly position, to reveal the false god it has been. We want instead to offer measurement a new job--that of helpful servant. We want to use measurement to give us the kind and quality of feedback that supports and welcomes people to step forward with their desire to contribute, to learn, and to achieve. We want measurement to be used from a deeper place of understanding, the understanding that the real capacity of an organization arises when colleagues willingly struggle together in a common work that they love.

ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.
Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: *margaretwheatley.com*. For more biographical information, see *margaretwheatley.com/bio*