

Are you measuring something meaningful?

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avoiding inert measures that anaesthetise your performance management

by Stacey Barr

introduction

You sit before the monthly report, which might be an inch or so thick, and you contemplate whether it's the best use of your time to paw through the pages to check if there's anything useful in there for you. Past experience tells you that the report is full of many measures graphed in all their splendor, but virtually none of them pique your interest, help you make the decisions you barely have time to give enough thought to as it is...

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typically, performance measures are not emotive enough

Do you have measures with names like these?

- Employee Productivity.
- Cost Efficiency.
- Product Quality.
- Community Engagement.
- Customer Relationship.
- Financial Sustainability.
- Stakeholder Buy-in.

If you do, then there's a good chance that those measures are either not brought to life, or what is brought to life is a poor indicator of the result you are trying to measure. Why? Because when people look at measures that are named like those listed above, they often have no idea what they exactly mean, or have very divergent ideas of what they think they mean, or have no feeling of connection to them. They just look like a list of buzz words or phrases that every one else seems to be tossing around.

If people don't share a single, sharply focused, easily imaginable vision of a result they want to create, any effort to measure that result will waste time. And if you do successfully get some measures established, it's likely they just won't stimulate the excitement and motivation needed to make the result happen.

because business language is inert

If something is inert it means it's incapable of action, it is lifeless. Like the reaction you get when you put a concrete brick in a bucket of water, pretty much nothing comes of it. You just have a concrete brick sitting in a bucket of water. When we talk about business language being inert, it's when the reaction you get to a business goal written down in a plan document is little or no noticeable change to the business. Here are some real examples that have personally left me baffled at what could possibly be meant:

"The outcomes will include valuable input into environmentally sustainable solutions to underpin the many proposed developments on the airport, as well as independent research to assist in making effective management decisions for this growing site." – What does 'valuable input' mean? How would you recognise an 'environmentally sustainable solution' from any other solution? What does a management decision that is effective look like?

"Support and focus [our] educational mission to undergraduates in a manner that is increasingly known for its holistic and integrated academic programs, its striving for excellence in all endeavors, and its engagement with the wider community through

service and learning.” – Increasingly known by whom? How do you imagine what a ‘holistic and integrated academic program’ looks like? Is it really all endeavors? Does everyone have the same idea about what ‘engagement with the wider community’ means?

“[Our Council] will increase its responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness in delivering high quality services. Emphasis will continue on streamlining core business and customer processes. Services will be provided in the most efficient manner possible at a reasonable cost while meeting environmental needs” – Responsiveness to what specifically? Efficiency of what, and what would people notice if it were happening? Isn’t effectiveness so broad that it could mean 23 different things to 7 different people? If something is streamlined, how is it different? Reasonable cost from whose perspective?

“Lead initiatives that foster diversity of staff and create culturally-competent care strategies supporting the local and international patients we serve.” – When you are fostering, what are you actually doing? What kinds of diversity are good, and what kinds of diversity should not be fostered? How would you distinguish a ‘culturally-competent care strategy’ from any other kind of competent care strategy (is it obvious to those that contribute to achieving this goal what a care strategy is exactly?).

Each of these goals share the prolific use of inert words like valuable, input, sustainable, underpin, effective, support, focus, holistic, integrated, excellence, engagement, service, enhance, responsiveness, efficiency, effectiveness (these last two I think must be the most used of all the inert words as building blocks to writing business goals), streamlining, reasonable, foster, diversity, competent and strategy. You can read more fine examples of inert language used in our society in Don Watson’s book, *Death Sentence: The Decay Of Public Language*. You know there are many more inert words that bulk-up our business language – perhaps when you have your next cup of your beverage of choice, you might sit down with your business’s plan and look for the inert words in the goal statements. How well do you really understand what those goals mean?

And that’s largely the effect of inert words in our business language – it’s often hard to really understand what they mean. For example, it’s far easier for you to imagine in your mind what it would be like to feel energetic all day and be able to sit and move comfortably and pain-free and think clearly and enjoy eating fresh foods like apples and carrots and sleep soundly at night, than it is to imagine having “health improvements”. When our language helps us vividly and in detail imagine the result it describes, it moves us, motivates us and almost programs us to make that result a reality. Sometimes it can even move us to realise that it’s not the result we really want, and we can avoid wasting effort traveling in that direction.

Particularly in business, ‘language that moves us’ is critical if you are going to design the right kind of measures to give you feedback about your progress toward your goals.

meaningful measures come from 'language that moves'

You simply can't measure a result that is described by inert language. Measures are data that we have analysed to give us some evidence of the degree to which a particular result is occurring. Like the measure of employee absenteeism is data about individual employees' attendance at work that has been analysed to give us some evidence of the degree to which employees are available for work. Evidence is something that is based in the physical world, the world of our 5 senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. So if a goal or result is to be measurable, then it must be able to be described in terms of what someone would see, hear, feel or do, taste or smell if that result were occurring.

Some fairly reasonable examples of organisational goals that get beyond the typical inert language are:

From the Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia, "*Improve decision making throughout the WCB, ensuring consistency with the legislation (proportion of issues leading to overturned decisions at the review or appeal level dues to WCB error in law or policy).*" – This goal has made an attempt to explain what improved decision making means quite specifically, and therefore quite measurably.

From Oxfam's Strategic Plan, "*Fewer people will die, fall sick, and suffer deprivation as a result of armed conflict or natural disasters.*" – This goal makes it very explicit what result they want to achieve, and people dying or falling sick is a very tangible result. Perhaps 'deprivation' could be more concretely explained, though.

From the United Nations, their first goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, part of which is to "*Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day.*" – Very specific. Goals like this, that are incredibly sharply focused on a single result, are very powerful motivators. The UN use three indicators to measure this goal (find out more at http://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_goals.asp).

In each of these cases, you can more easily visualize what achieving the result would be like, than for those examples on the previous page. This 'language that moves us' is often comprised of sensory based language, because it describes the experiences we have through our physical senses: what we would see, hear, feel or do, taste or smell if that result were occurring. The Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia would hear fewer of their decisions being overturned at the review or appeal level on account of their own error. Oxfam would see that armed conflict would be causing less people dying or falling sick. The United Nations would see that more people are living on more than \$1 a day. And all these things are countable, and therefore measurable.

So the effect of sensory based language? You can more easily imagine in your mind what it would be like if the goal or result was happening, and then you can more easily pin-point the kind of evidence or data you could collect that will help you keep tabs on how much it is happening as time goes by. From this evidence or data, you construct your meaningful measures.

see it, hear it, feel it... then you can measure it

There is still a long way to go for business, in improving its ability to communicate in general, but particularly to communicate its goals to its employees (to give them direction), and to its other stakeholders (to clarify its promises). It's really not too hard to start with our existing goals, however inert, and make the space for some rich dialogue about what those goals really mean, painting a sensory rich picture of what we would see, hear, feel or do, taste or smell if those goals were achieved. This will make the measurement of those goals unbelievably easier. And who knows, you might even get truly closer to that elusive thing we call a shared vision.

TAKING ACTION:

Look over your strategic or business or operational plan and check for inert language ('weasel words'). What results do your goals and objectives really imply? Then read more about how you can make these results more sensory specific, engaging and measurable at <http://www.staceybarr.com/measuredesign.html>

references

Don Watson, "Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language", *Random House Australia*, 2003

Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia Strategic Goals, http://www.worksafebc.com/facts_and_figures/wcb_strategic_goals/default.asp

UN Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stacey Barr is a specialist in performance measurement, helping people to move their business or organisation's performance from where it is, to where they want it to be.

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