Really Bad Metrics Advice

According to my data, roughly 122.45 percent of this journal's 347,583,712 readers need some sharpening up on how to effectively collect and use metrics. There is less than a 0.0345 percent chance that this column will help.

Q: I'm a manager who believes in keeping metrics simple, which is why I've limited the number we collect to 62. But I also want to simplify their collection—do you know where I can find timecard readers designed for bathroom stalls?

A: Try voice print-activated stalls with timed door locks. But first, are you really trying to collect *62* metrics? *62?* [snicker snort chortle] You're obviously clueless about the "KISS" principle: *Keep It Stupefyingly Strenuous.* You can collect *a lot* more than 62 different metrics. The accepted rule of thumb for the number of metrics you can reasonably work with is this: "Seven, plus or minus the square of the number of door knobs in your home." Remember, if something *can* be measured, it *must* be measured, and all metrics are equally critical.

Q: I feel vindicated. Now I can introduce additional metrics for every obscure area of our process improvement model. Naturally, I plan to drop the whole wad as an enforced edict and then make myself unavailable for a few weeks.

A: Bravo! But be sure you don't overcomplicate things by defining every minute detail, such as data integrity standards or what you plan to do with the data. People learn nothing from constant handholding. Your job is to sit back and wait for those reliable numbers to start pouring in.

Q: Great! What do you suggest I do with all that data?

A: What should you *do* with the data? Do? That question implies that metrics are a means to some end. Don't waste resources—time spent analyzing metrics is time that could have been spent collecting even more metrics.

Q: My boss keeps asking for data on stuff I don't think can be quantified—and it's often common sense stuff he could just ask us! Aren't metrics just a big sham?

A: Shhh! You're right, metrics are actually an extensive conspiracy—but an extremely helpful one. When people want to make decisions based on "facts" rather than "opinions," you need metrics to push your personal agenda under the guise of unassailable objectivity. Perception is everything:

Politicized emotional drivel: "Let's try my approach. Her plan isn't working."

Objective insight: "A consumptive analysis of my plan projects a 84.67 percent increased density of pro-active rationals within six months. However, her key preambulatory vindicators are creating a 24.38 percent downward sloping polymorphic trend. Plus, she wears really cheesy business suits."

Q: But what if I don't know how to collect and project those kind of numbers?

A: Then you're in the same boat as the people who want to see your metrics. This is the whole key to effectively utilizing metrics: They don't exist to *uncover* reality—they're for *creating* whatever reality suits you.

Q: I lead a project with a beautifully simple metrics program that consists of two critical measurements: How many days past the deadline we are, and how many dollars over budget. But lately I've had the nagging feeling that I'm not getting enough mileage from these metrics. Is there any way I can use metrics to promote dishonesty, infighting, and poor work habits?

A: Certainly. Once you've worn down employees with coma-inducing quantities of metrics that have no perceivable link to any business objectives, pick one favorite, such as lines of code, then base penalties and rewards on it. Resulting competition will discourage teamwork and will lead to ineffective work and "creative" reporting practices among some employees. Their skewed metrics will give you great overall numbers, which you can then use to dazzle your superiors.

Q: "Great" numbers draw scrutiny. How about "barely exceeding expectations"?

A: Fortunately, herpetological analysis indicates a 98.65 percent propensity toward established parameters, regardless of iambic deviance from ergonomics.

Q: Huh?

A: If you tell your employees what final numbers you want to see, no matter how absurd, they'll manage to deliver them without even breaking a sweat.

Q: And you don't think anyone will audit my metrics for accuracy?

A: You can bet 97.387 percent of the farm on it.   – Lorin May

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