



HOW ARE YOU DOING? MEASURE OUTCOMES, NOT ACTIVITY, TO FIND OUT

In the United Kingdom, in an effort to improve service to patients in emergency rooms, the National Health Service began to measure the number of times patients had to wait more than four hours from the time they entered the emergency room until they saw a doctor. Not wanting to be found deficient, many emergency rooms simply refused to let people in, until they were sure they could see them within four hours. This created a phenomenon called ambulance stacking, in which long lines of ambulances were seen idling in a line in front of emergency rooms, waiting to unload their patients. Of course, ambulance response times throughout the UK increased because so many ambulances were idling at hospitals.

It's a classic example of measuring the wrong things. (Thanks to Seattle-based nonprofit consultant and author Rick Lynch for the example.) Don't let it happen to your organization! Your supporters are much more interested in what you accomplish than how you accomplish it. They want to know outcomes, so that's what we have to measure. Watch out for these common mistakes:

- **Mistaking effort for results** – It's easy to get so bogged down in activities that we forget the purpose of those activities. Members of a hospital auxiliary had, for years, been knitting caps for newborns. They were proud of the hundreds of caps they had knitted. Then someone discovered that there were closets full of unused caps. Suppose you have a tutoring program, and you measure the number of volunteer hours contributed to the program. What good is that, unless you also measure an outcome, such as student learning?
- **Mistaking quality of activity for results** – "Students will be taught in a professional manner." That's fine, but it calls to mind a conversation between two friends:

"What did you do this summer?"

"I taught my dog to sing."

"Really? I'd like to hear your dog sing!"

"Oh, I didn't say she learned. I just said I taught her."

- **Mistaking a method for results** – A school might mandate that all elementary teachers use the phonics method for teaching reading. It might be a super method, but even if every teacher uses that method, it doesn't mean their students are learning to read. In today's high-tech

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world, adoption of particular equipment sometimes is thought of as a result. But it is only a means to an end – such as higher productivity.

How to measure outcomes

First, begin with the result, or outcome, you are trying to achieve. Not the number of hours of counseling, for example, but rather the improved mental health that results.

Once you have a result in mind, you can measure it by asking two questions. First, “What information would tell us that the result is being achieved?” Usually the statement of the result will imply the desired information.

The second question is a bit trickier. “How will we collect the information?” For any given outcome there often are many different ways to collect the information, each of which may require different levels of effort and produce different kinds of information.

Yes, it’s work -- more than many managers are willing to do -- so it’s tempting to take the easy course of measuring a set of activities -- hours of volunteer involvement, for example. Doing that, however, blinds you to the vital information of how well you’re doing, deprives volunteers and paid staff of a sense of accomplishment, and leaves supporters wondering whether their support is misplaced. So make it about outcomes, not activity.