

THE EMBEDDED MARKET · CHAPTER TEN

Counting What Speaks

Chapter Ten of The Embedded Market

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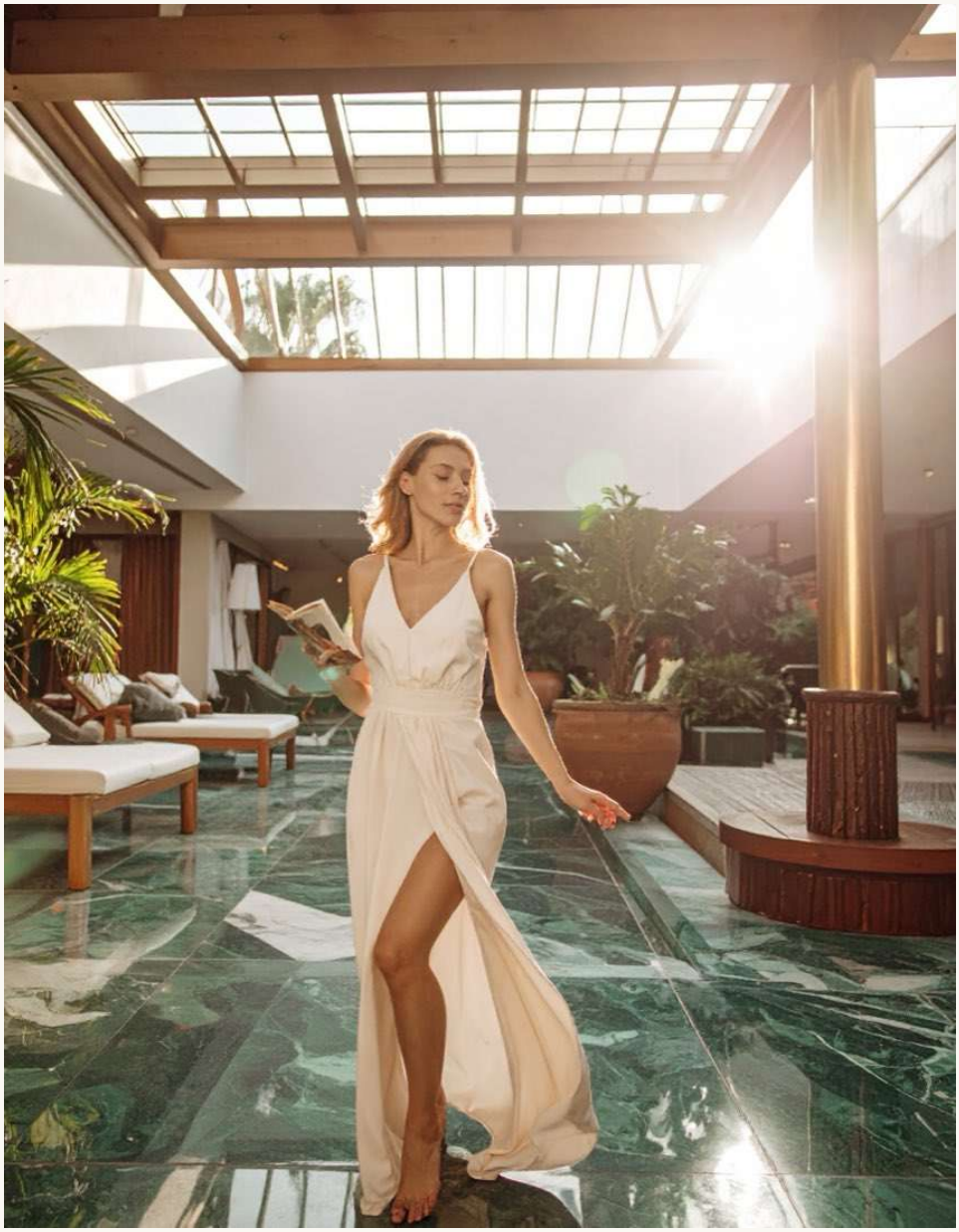
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ABSTRACT

At the end of a first quarter of listening, a convenor brings the sponsor a sheet of figures. Concerns raised: up by more than half on the quarter before. Grievances logged through the formal channel: up as well. Two suppliers have flagged quality problems that nobody had heard about. The sponsor looks at the sheet, and her first reaction is the one almost every leader has: things have got worse. They have not. Almost certainly, the problems on the sheet were there before. What changed is where they arrived. Last quarter they travelled as silence, then as a resignation, then as a late delivery. This quarter they arrived as words, in a place where someone could act on them. The sheet is the best news the organisation has had in a year, and it looks like bad news.

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The good number

At the end of a first quarter of listening, a convenor brings the sponsor a sheet of figures. Concerns raised: up by more than half on the quarter before. Grievances logged through the formal channel: up as well. Two suppliers have flagged quality problems that nobody had heard about. The sponsor looks at the sheet, and her first reaction is the one almost every leader has: things have got worse.

They have not. Almost certainly, the problems on the sheet were there before. What changed is where they arrived. Last quarter they travelled as silence, then as a resignation, then as a late delivery. This quarter they arrived as words, in a place where someone could act on them. The sheet is the best news the organisation has had in a year, and it looks like bad news.

That is the central difficulty of measuring voice, and it is why this chapter exists. Every instrument for counting what people say has a built-in trap: the measures of health and the measures of trouble are the same numbers, read in different directions. A leader who does not know which direction to read will dismantle a working system at the moment it starts working.

This chapter sets out what to count, how to read it honestly, and what the numbers cannot tell. It draws on four pieces of research already met in this book, and on one sentence from Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* that is worth holding throughout: "Designing such measurement systems is among the most important — and most difficult — practical challenges the movement faces."

Why counting voice is hard

There are three reasons, and they compound.

The first is that silence produces no data. An exit leaves a trace: a cancelled contract, a resignation letter, a lost customer in the ledger. Voice leaves a trace when it is used. Its absence leaves nothing. An organisation that has stopped hearing its people does not see a falling line on a chart. It sees no line at all, and no line looks the same as calm. Morrison and Milliken's account of organisational silence is precisely about this: a shared belief that speaking up is futile or dangerous produces a climate in which people stay quiet together, and the quiet is easily read as agreement.[37] *Organizational Soul Work* puts the same point in eight words: "Organizational silence is not the absence of speech." It is speech that has gone somewhere else, into the corridor, the exit interview, the next employer.

The second is that the numbers move in the wrong direction at first. When a channel opens, the backlog of things nobody said arrives through it. Counts rise. The rise is the measure working. A leader who reads it as deterioration, and a board that reads it the same way, will be tempted to close the channel, or to change how things are counted until the numbers look better.

The third is that the people being counted can see the count. Any measure that matters to a leader becomes, sooner or later, a target for the people it measures. The economist Charles Goodhart observed in the 1970s that a statistical regularity tends to break down once it is used for control, and the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern later gave the idea its widely quoted general form: a measure that becomes a target stops being a good measure.[38] A team told that its number of raised concerns is being watched will raise more concerns, or fewer, depending on what it believes the leader wants. Either way, the number stops telling the leader what the team thinks.

None of these makes measurement impossible. Each changes how it has to be done.

What the research measured, and what it found

Four studies carry most of the weight in this book's account of voice, and each is worth reading for what it counted as well as what it found.

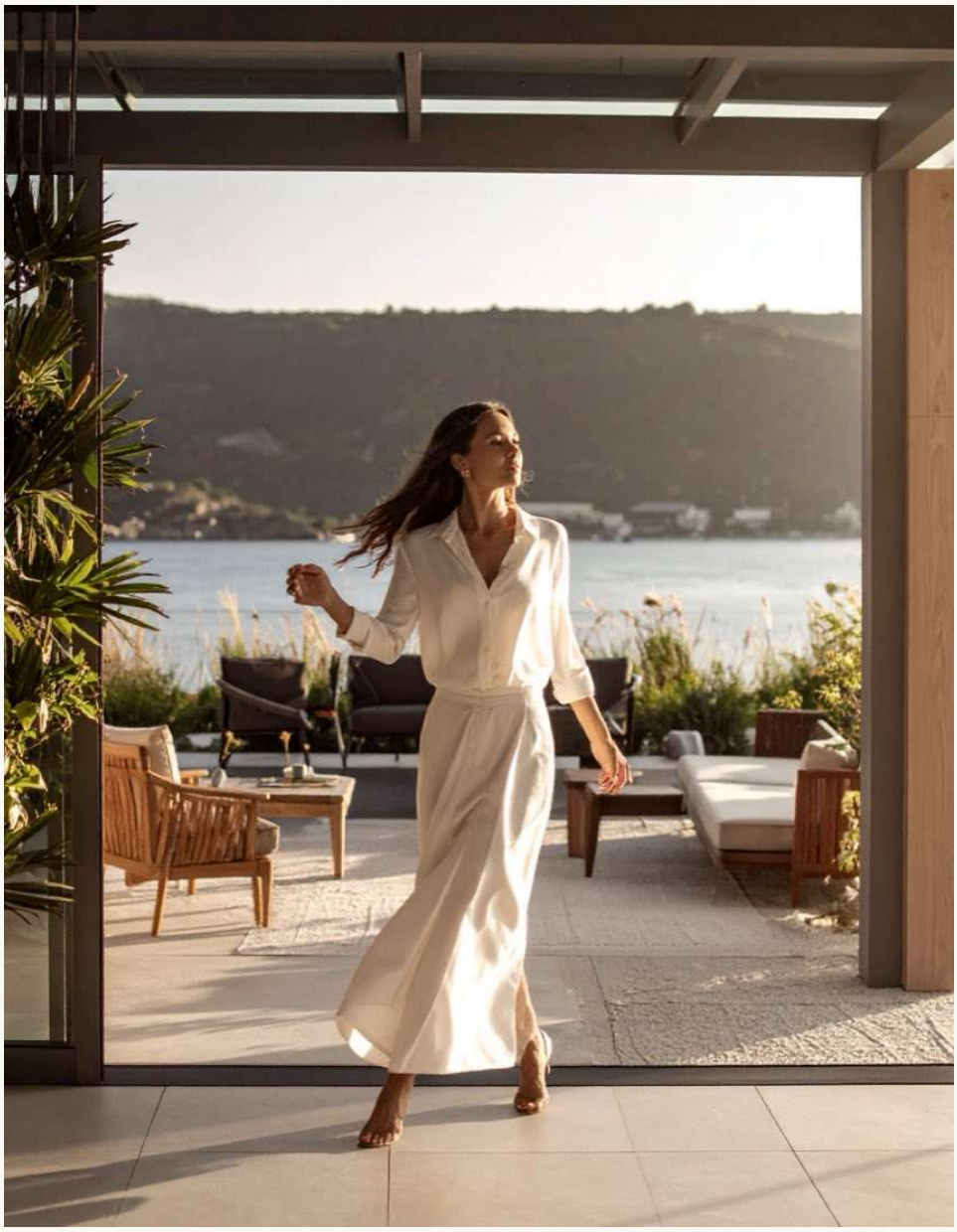
Freeman, 1980. Richard Freeman used several large American labour-market data sets to compare union members, who had a formal voice channel through grievance procedures, with comparable non-members. The measure was exit: quits, permanent separations and job tenure. Union members exited significantly less, and Freeman argued that the grievance system played a major role.[39] The lesson for measurement is that he did not count voice directly. He counted exit, and inferred voice from the gap. That is often the most honest route available: voice is hard to see, exit is easy, and a fall in avoidable exit where a voice channel has been opened is evidence the channel is doing something.

Edmondson, 1999. Amy Edmondson studied fifty-one work teams in a manufacturing company. She measured a shared belief, team psychological safety, with survey items; she measured learning behaviour, the asking of questions, seeking of feedback, discussion of errors; and she measured team performance. Psychological safety was associated with learning behaviour, and learning behaviour mediated the relationship between safety and performance.[40] The lesson for measurement is that the thing being measured lived at the level of the team, not the individual. A survey score averaged across an organisation would have hidden it. Voice happens in a particular room with particular people. Count it there.

Detert and Burris, 2007. In a restaurant chain, with 3,149 employees and 223 managers, James Detert and Ethan Burris measured two kinds of leadership behaviour and the improvement-oriented voice of the people who reported to each manager. Managerial openness was more consistently related to voice than transformational leadership, the relationship ran through perceived psychological safety, and leadership behaviour had its strongest effect on the voice of the best-performing employees.[41] The lesson for measurement is the last finding. If voice falls first among your strongest people, an average across everyone will show the fall late, and small. Count who speaks, not only how much is said.

Morrison and Milliken, 2000. This is a theoretical paper, not a measurement study, and that is its use here. It describes the conditions, a belief among managers that employees are self-interested, that disagreement is bad, that management knows best, under which silence becomes collective.[37] The lesson for measurement is that silence has causes upstream of any individual's choice, in what leaders believe and in how decisions are structured. A count of voice that does not also look at those structures will find the symptom and miss the source.

Each of these studies is limited to its setting: American labour markets of one era, one manufacturing company, one restaurant chain, one theoretical framework. Together they do not prove that any particular measurement will work in your organisation. They show which things are worth counting, and at what level.



Six things to count

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Six things to count

What follows is a small set of measures, chosen because each can be kept by a convenor with a notebook or a simple sheet, and each answers a question a leader needs answered. They are not a scorecard to be optimised. They are a set of readings to be taken together.

1. Voices raised, by source. The number of concerns, warnings, objections and ideas raised through the channels in scope, recorded each week, broken down by where they came from: which team, which suppli-

er, which group. The total matters less than the distribution. A count that rises overall while one team stays at zero is telling you about that team.

2. Time to response. For each voice, the number of days from its being raised to the person who raised it being told what happened, whether the answer was *acted*, *not acting* with a reason, or *investigating* by a date. Record the median, not the mean, because one long-running item can pull a mean far from the typical experience. This is the measure most directly under the sponsor's control, and the one Detert and Burris's finding points to most clearly: what a leader visibly does with what she is told.

3. Closed loops. The share of voices raised in a period for which the raiser was told the outcome. A voice that is acted on but never reported back is, from the raiser's side, indistinguishable from a voice that was ignored. The loop is not closed until they know.

4. Linked pairs. From the Weekly Exit and Voice Review in the thirteenth chapter: the number of exits in a period that followed an earlier voice from the same person or party that was not acted on. These are the most expensive lines in the record, because they show voice arriving in time and being lost. A falling count of linked pairs is the clearest sign that the rhythm between exit and voice is working.

5. Who leaves first. For every exit in scope, a simple mark: was this a party the organisation would least like to lose? Hirschman's sharpest prediction, met in the first chapter, is that the most quality-sensitive members exit earliest. Detert and Burris's finding about best performers is the same pattern inside a firm. If the marked exits rise as a share of all exits, the organisation is losing its most informative critics, whatever the totals say.

6. Silence, as a count. For every party in scope, the number of weeks since they last raised anything. A party with a long run of silence is not necessarily content. Mark it, and ask. This is the measure the Membrane Map's S symbol exists for, kept as a number so that a lengthening silence can be seen before it ends in an exit.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's book asks for exactly this kind of breadth: "Ecstatic economics requires multi-dimensional measurement that includes financial sustainability *and* relational quality *and* ecological impact *and* somatic vitality." The six measures here are a small, practical piece of the relational dimension. They sit beside the financial figures a leader already keeps, not in place of them.

Base rates: knowing what normal looks like

A count means little without a baseline. Before a quarter of listening begins, the convenor should reconstruct, as far as the records allow, the six measures for the previous two quarters. Most organisations can reconstruct exits and who left from personnel and supplier records. Many can reconstruct some formal grievances and complaints. Few can reconstruct informal voice, because nobody wrote it down, and that gap is itself a finding: a starting count of *unknown* for informal voice is honest, and better than a guess.

Three cautions about base rates.

Seasons. Exits cluster: after bonus dates, at the end of school years, at contract renewal. Compare a quarter with the same quarter last year, not only with the quarter before.

Small numbers. In a team of twelve, one resignation is eight per cent of the team. A change from one exit to two is not a trend. With small numbers, read the individual cases, not the rates. The point of the count in a small team is to make sure nothing is forgotten, not to compute a percentage.

Changes in counting. When a new channel opens, things that used to be raised informally and never recorded begin to be recorded. The count rises because the recording improved. Note the date any channel or recording method changes, and read every count across that date with care.

Goodhart at the kitchen table

The most important rule for using these measures is that none of them should become a target for the people being measured. They are readings for the sponsor and the second reader, not goals for teams.

In practice that means three things.

Do not reward the count of voices. A team rewarded for raising more concerns will raise more concerns, some of them manufactured. A team penalised for raising many will raise fewer, and the real ones will go back to the corridor. The count of voices is read, never rewarded.

Do reward the response. The measures that can safely become commitments are the ones under the leader's own control: time to response and closed loops. A sponsor who commits publicly to answering every concern within three working days has made a promise about her own conduct. If she games it, by answering quickly and emptily, the people raising concerns will see that at once, which is a better check than any auditor.

Watch the measure that nobody is targeting. If the response measures improve while linked pairs and the exits of valued people do not, the response measures are being met in form and missed in substance. Linked pairs and who leaves first are hard to game, because they are recorded after the fact and depend on what other people decide.

Organizational Soul Work names the trap behind this rule. When a truth is named and immediately met with a fix, the book says, the organisation does not fully receive it. A measurement regime can do the same thing at scale: it converts every voice into an item to be closed, and the closing becomes the point. The count goes up, the loop is closed, and nobody has listened. The book's sentence is a fair warning for any convenor: "When a truth is named and immediately followed by a solution, the system doesn't fully receive the truth."



Reading the six together

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Reading the six together

The measures make sense only in combination. Four patterns are common, and each has a reading.

Voices up, response time down, linked pairs down, valued exits steady or down. The membrane is opening. Problems are arriving earlier and being answered. This is what a good first or second quarter looks like, and it is the pattern most likely to be misread as bad news, because the first number is up.

Voices down, response time up, linked pairs up. The organisation is moving toward silence. People raised things, waited, and stopped. The exits that follow will carry what the voices would have. This pattern calls for the Voice Cost Ledger, done honestly, at once.

Voices up, response time up, closed loops down. The channel has opened faster than the organisation can answer. People are speaking and not hearing back. This is fragile: if it lasts more than a few weeks, it will turn into the second pattern. The remedy is not to discourage voice but to answer more simply, even if the answer is only *investigating, by this date*.

Every measure steady, and quiet. The most difficult reading. It may mean genuine health. It may mean the channels are not reaching anyone. The test is the sixth measure, silence: if many parties in scope have said nothing for a long time, the steadiness is probably the quiet of a closed membrane. Ask them.

What the numbers cannot tell you

Measures of voice share the limits of every measure of a living system, and a convenor should be able to state them plainly to a sceptical board.

They cannot tell you whether what was said was true. A count of concerns raised records that someone spoke, not that they were right. Judging the content is the sponsor's work, not the convenor's.

They cannot tell you about people who were never in scope. The six measures cover the relationships chosen at the start of the quarter. The exits and silences outside that boundary are invisible to them. That is why the audit is repeated, and why the second reader's first question is always *who did we not look at?*

They cannot tell you what caused what. A fall in exits after a voice channel opens is consistent with the channel working, as Freeman's work suggests in one setting. It is also consistent with a better labour market, a new manager, or a dozen other things. Over several quarters and several teams, a consistent pattern becomes more persuasive. In one quarter it is a reason to keep going, not a proof.

And they cannot measure the thing the whole book has been describing, which is a quality of relationship. *Ecstatic Economics* makes the general case against a single number in its account of gross domestic product: "The metric that drives global economic policy literally cannot distinguish between activity that generates genuine prosperity and activity that destroys it." Voice counts are much humbler instruments, but they share the limit. They count events. Whether the events add up to an organisation that hears itself is a judgement, made by people, reading the counts beside everything else they know.

The second reader's questions

At every gate in the field manual, the second reader asks the same four questions of the record. They are worth stating as the close of this chapter, because they are the discipline that keeps measurement honest.

Who will actually use this number, and for what? A count read by the sponsor to decide where to listen is safe. The same count read by a board to rank managers is a target, and it will be gamed.

What did the count not look at? Every measure has a denominator: the parties in scope, the channels recorded, the weeks covered. State it next to the number, every time.

Is the improvement real, or did the counting change? Check the dates on which channels opened and recording methods changed. Read across them carefully.

Is this a gap or a boundary? A silent party may be a relationship where voice has died. It may also be a relationship that is rightly arm's-length, where the price says almost everything that needs saying, as chapter 13 argued. Mark which it is before treating the silence as a failure.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Conscious Governance Models* records something that boards which take measurement seriously often discover: "Many governance groups report that their most important insights emerge not from discussion but from the silence between discussions." The numbers in this chapter are a way of making that silence legible, of seeing where it falls and how long it lasts. They do not replace the listening. They tell you where to go and do it. The fuller argument for measuring what money alone cannot see is in *Ecstatic Economics*; the series book on patient capital, patient capital, sets out why owners who intend to stay are the ones most willing to wait for measures like these to mature. For a balanced reading that keeps financial and relational measures on one page, see the Alpha Paper *Alpha balanced-scorecard-1*.

The Tool: The Voice Measures Sheet

One sheet, kept weekly by the convenor, read monthly by the sponsor and quarterly by the second reader.

1. Set the scope and the denominator. At the top of the sheet, list the parties in scope: teams, suppliers, partners, groups. Write the number. Every figure below is read against it.
2. Reconstruct the baseline. For the two previous quarters, fill in what the records allow: exits, exits of valued parties, formal complaints and grievances. Write *unknown* for informal voice where nothing was recorded. Do not estimate.
3. Keep six columns, weekly. For each party in scope: *voices raised* this week; *median days to response* for voices closed this week; *loops closed* (raiser told the outcome) as a share of voices due; *linked pairs* (an exit following an unanswered voice); *valued exits* (marked yes or no); *weeks of silence* since the party last raised anything.
4. Mark the changes. Whenever a channel opens, closes, or the method of recording changes, draw a line across the sheet and write the date and what changed. Read every trend across that line with care.
5. Read monthly, in patterns. Once a month the sponsor reads the sheet for the four patterns: opening (voices up, response down, pairs down); closing (voices down, response up, pairs up); overload (voices

up, response up, loops down); steady and quiet (check the silence column). Write one sentence naming the pattern.

6. Commit only to what is yours. The sponsor may publish commitments on median days to response and on closed loops. The count of voices, the linked pairs and valued exits are never targets for teams and never used to rank managers.
7. Ask the four questions quarterly. The second reader writes one paragraph answering: who uses these numbers and for what; what they did not look at; whether any improvement crosses a line in step 4; which silences are gaps and which are boundaries.

Reading the sheet. After two quarters, the measures should show a rising or stable count of voices with a falling median response time and a falling number of linked pairs. Valued exits should be no higher as a share of all exits. A long silence column that is shrinking means the membrane is reaching further. If every number improves at once in the first month, check step 4 before believing it.

Your page — run the The Voice Measures Sheet here, dated.

A note on method

No figures in this chapter are computed for any organisation; the patterns described are readings to be checked against the reader's own records. Goodhart's observation and Strathern's general form of it are paraphrased, not quoted.

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