

THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER NINE

Counting What the Commons Holds

Chapter Nine of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Every leader who has governed a commons for a quarter is asked the same question by someone above them: did it work? The question sounds simple and is not. A commons has at least three things that can be measured, and they can move in different directions. The resource can recover while the relationships that keep it are fraying. The relationships can deepen while the resource, for reasons nobody controls, declines. And both can look healthy on a sheet while the loops that would catch the next problem have quietly stopped turning. So this chapter asks three questions instead of one. Is the resource in better condition? Is it being used well? And are the loops working? The first two are what most people measure, if they measure at all. The third is what this book has argued keeps a commons alive, and it is the one most often left uncounted.

CHAPTER NINE

Counting What the Commons Holds



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Three questions, not one

Every leader who has governed a commons for a quarter is asked the same question by someone above them: *did it work?* The question sounds simple and is not. A commons has at least three things that can be measured, and they can move in different directions. The resource can recover while the relationships that keep it are fraying. The relationships can deepen while the resource, for reasons nobody controls, declines. And both can look healthy on a sheet while the loops that would catch the next problem have quietly stopped turning.

So this chapter asks three questions instead of one. Is the resource in better condition? Is it being used well? And are the loops working? The first two are what most people measure, if they measure at all. The third is what this book has argued keeps a commons alive, and it is the one most often left uncounted.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* is unsparing about what happens when an economy counts the wrong things. Of the most famous measure of all, it says:

> *The metric that drives global economic policy literally cannot distinguish between activity that generates genuine prosperity and activity that destroys it.*[61]

A commons can be measured into the same blindness. The claim of this chapter is this: measure the resource, the use and the loops together, read them against a baseline honestly taken, and treat every number as a question for the regular meeting rather than a verdict from above.

The first question: the resource

The condition of the resource is the measure that matters most and is often the hardest to see. For a pasture, it is the grass. For a fishery, the fish, which cannot be counted directly and must be estimated. For a team's commons, it is usually something with a body attached.

In the composite consultancy of Chapter 8, the resource is the bench of eight specialists, and its condition is the condition of the people on it. The obvious measure is hours worked; the more telling one is evenings worked, because evenings are where an overdrawn commons shows first, the way a falling water table showed first in the salt creeping into Ostrom's Los Angeles wells. A third is departures: two of the eight had left in a year. A departure is the commons' equivalent of a collapsed stock, and it is a lagging measure, arriving long after the damage.

For other commons the choice is similar. A shared budget's condition is its balance against its period, and the size and frequency of emergency top-ups. A knowledge base's condition is the share of its pages that are current, which can be estimated by sampling twenty pages a month and asking someone who knows whether each is still true. A meeting calendar's condition is the share of the working week left free for fo-

cused work. A household's joint account's condition is the balance at the low point of the month, and how often it touches zero.

Two finer points. First, choose at least one leading measure, which moves before damage is done, and one lagging measure, which confirms it. Evenings worked lead; departures lag. Second, prefer measures the users themselves can see and gather in the ordinary course of work. Chapter 4 called this monitoring as a by-product, and it matters as much for measurement as for governance: a measure gathered by an outsider, for an outsider, is the outside rule in numerical form.

The second question: use

Use is about how the resource is drawn on, by whom, and whether the drawing matches the rules the users agreed.

In the composite, the use measures are the share of each team's allocation drawn in a fortnight, the use of the reserve, and the share of requests met within a fortnight. In a shared budget, they are spending by group against allocation. In a household, they are the categories of spending each person draws on without asking, against what was agreed.

The finer point here is distribution. An average can hide a commons in trouble. If eleven teams draw within their allocation and one draws twice its share, the average looks tolerable while the twelfth team is behaving as Hardin's herdsman. Record use by user, not only in total, and look at the spread. The question principle 2B asks is whether what each takes bears a sensible relation to what each gives, and that question can only be answered person by person, or team by team.



The third question: the loops

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The third question: the loops

This is the measure this book adds to the ordinary practice, and it follows directly from Chapter 4. If a commons lives by four loops, each loop can be timed and counted.

The sense loop: delay. How long, on average, between overuse and someone accountable to the users knowing about it? Before the composite built its shared view, the answer was weeks; after, a day. This is the single most useful number a commons can keep, because every other loop waits on it. Measure it by taking each breach in the period and asking when it happened and when it was first noticed.

The reflex loop: the share settled at the first rung. Of all the breaches of the ladder in the period, what share were settled by a private word, rung one, without going further? A healthy commons settles most at the first rung. A share that falls over time means either that the first word is not being said, or that it is not being heard. A share of one hundred per cent with very few breaches may mean the commons is healthy, or that nobody is noticing; the delay measure tells the two apart.

The repair loop: days to settle. Of the disputes raised in the period, how long from raised to settled, and how many went around the agreed place (to a manager, a sponsor, a lawyer, or simply into silence)? Valencia's answer to the first is a week at most. The second number, disputes that went around, is the more important: each is a sign that the repair loop is not trusted.

The learning loop: rule changes. How many rules did the users change in the period, and who proposed them? A commons that has changed no rule in a year is either perfectly adapted or no longer listening. A commons whose rule changes all come from one person is not practising principle 3, whatever the charter says.

The door: entry. How many people joined the commons in the period, by what route, and how long did it take? A boundary that nobody has crossed in a year is, in practice, a wall.

None of these loop measures needs special software. Each can be kept by the keeper of the record in a few minutes a week, from the notes of the regular meeting. Together they form a picture that no measure of the resource alone can give: not whether the commons is well, but whether it can tell when it is not.

The Luminous 100's reading of the Balanced Scorecard asks the question these measures exist to answer, among others:

> *What processes are most alive?*[62]



Trust, read honestly

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Trust, read honestly

Behind all the loops is trust, which Chapter 6 named as the triad of trust, reciprocity and reputation in Ostrom's account. A leader will want to measure it, and should, with care.

The simplest honest measure is a short question asked of every user at the start and at the end of the quarter, answered anonymously on a scale of one to five: *I expect the others who share this resource to take their fair share and no more.* A second: *If I raised a concern about how this resource is used, it would be heard fairly.* The answers are not a measurement of trust in any strict sense; they are a measurement of what people are will-

ing to report about it, at that moment, to that asker. They are still worth having, because their direction over time, read alongside the loops, says something the loops cannot.

Two cautions. First, with small groups, the numbers are small. Twenty users answering on a five-point scale will produce movements that can come from two people changing their minds; read them as conversation starters, not results. Second, the act of asking changes what is asked about. A group that is surveyed on trust every week will begin to perform it.

The better evidence of trust is behavioural, and it is already in the loop measures. People who trust a commons bring disputes to it rather than around it. They say the first word rather than saving it up. They propose rule changes. They join through the door rather than calling the sponsor. A commons in which all four are happening is trusted, whatever the survey says.

Baselines and the selection trap

A measure means nothing without a baseline, and the baseline must be taken before the change, not reconstructed after it.

The thirteen-week sequence in Chapter 8 takes its baseline from the three weeks before Week 2, before any rule is introduced. That timing matters, because the first change in the sequence, the shared view, is itself an intervention. People who can see their own use change it. The baseline should therefore be gathered, where possible, from records that existed before the shared view: emails, calendars, invoices, recollection checked against documents. A baseline built from the first week of a new dashboard measures a commons that has already started to change.

The second trap is selection, and it is the same trap Chapter 7 found in Ostrom's own evidence. A leader tends to choose for governing the commons that is most visibly in trouble. Such commons often improve somewhat in any case, because things at their worst tend to drift back toward the ordinary; statisticians call it regression to the mean. A commons chosen for its crisis that improves after thirteen weeks may have improved because of the governing, or because the crisis was unusual. The honest response is not to stop measuring but to say so, and where possible to compare with a similar commons that was not yet governed. In the composite, the meeting rooms, which were overrun but not yet under a charter, provide that comparison for the first quarter.



When the measure becomes the target

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When the measure becomes the target

In 1975 the economist Charles Goodhart observed that statistical regularities tend to break down once they are used for control. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern later gave the idea the short form most people now quote: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.[63] Every commons that begins measuring itself meets this sooner or later.

In the composite, the danger is plain. If teams are judged by whether they stay within their allocation, some will stop asking for specialist help they need, and client work will suffer while the measure looks per-

fect. If the specialists are judged by evenings worked, some will work from home at night and not log it. The measure stays green; the commons does not.

The defence is in the design of the measures and in where they go. Keep several, so that gaming one shows in another: evenings worked alongside requests met, allocation used alongside client outcomes. Let the measures go first to the users, at the regular meeting, as questions about their own commons, and only then, in summary, to the sponsor. And never attach a reward or a penalty to a single loop measure. The moment the share of breaches settled at the first rung becomes a target, breaches will stop being recorded.

There is a sharper version of the same lesson in a study every reader who designs a sanction should know. In 2000, Uri Gneezy and Aldo Rustichini reported a field experiment in Israeli day-care centres.[64] Parents sometimes arrived late to collect their children. In some centres a small fine for late collection was introduced. Late collections did not fall. They rose, and when the fine was removed they stayed at the higher level. The authors' title gives their reading: *a fine is a price*. Before the fine, lateness was a breach of an informal obligation to the teachers; after it, lateness was a service that could be bought. The fine had replaced a norm with a transaction, and the norm did not come back.

It is one study, in one country, of one kind of obligation. It does not show that sanctions always backfire. But it shows why the ladder in Chapter 5 begins with a word rather than a charge, and why the measures in this chapter should be read for what they say about the relationship, not only about the resource. A commons that starts to price its breaches may find it has sold its norms.

Many methods, one question

Ostrom's own last major book on method, written with Amy Poteete and Marco Janssen and published in 2010 as *Working Together*, argued that the commons cannot be understood by any single method.[65] Case studies show mechanisms and context; large comparisons show patterns but miss mechanisms; experiments isolate causes but strip away the setting; models make assumptions explicit but rest on them. The authors' recommendation was to combine methods, and to let each correct the blind spots of the others.

A leader governing a small commons can follow the same advice at small scale. Keep the numbers on the health sheet. Keep the keeper's notes of the regular meeting, which are a case study written as it happens. Ask the users, once a quarter, for one sentence each on what has changed. And when a number moves, ask at the Thursday meeting why, before concluding anything. A number that agrees with the story the users tell is worth believing. A number that disagrees with it is worth a conversation.



Reading results without fooling yourself

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Reading results without fooling yourself

At the end of a quarter, the keeper and the convenor sit down with the health sheet. Five rules help them read it honestly.

First, say the denominator. Every figure on the sheet should state what it counted and what it did not: *nine evenings a week across the bench, from logged hours; evenings not logged are not counted.*

Second, a missing figure is not a zero. If the loop measures could not be gathered for three weeks because the keeper was away, the sheet says so; it does not fill the gap with the average.

Third, look for the measure that disagrees. If use is within allocation, the resource is recovering, and the loops are turning, but one specialist is still working four evenings a week, that one figure is the most important line on the sheet.

Fourth, distinguish a gate from a break. A rising number of rung-one conversations in the first month is usually good news: the sense loop is working and people are saying the first word. Read in isolation it can look like a commons in trouble.

Fifth, write down what the measures cannot show. The quality of a relationship, the specialist who stopped looking for another job, the project lead who began documenting her team's requests without being asked: none of these is on the sheet, and all of them belong in the review.

Santa Anna's book names the cost of the alternative, the vigilance of a person who must defend their own share alone, in words that apply to a team as much as to a household:

> *It forces each individual nervous system into a state of chronic vigilance that is metabolically expensive and psychologically exhausting.*[66]

A health sheet that never measures that vigilance has missed what the commons was for.

The sibling volume on ecological economics makes the same argument about national measures, and the volume on regenerative economics about firms' own accounts: count what keeps the system alive, not only what it produces.

A shepherd does not count the grass blade by blade. He walks the pasture in the evening and knows.

The Tool: The Commons Health Sheet

A one-page sheet kept by the keeper of the record, filled in at the baseline (before any change) and then every four weeks. Each line states what was counted and what was not.

The commons: Period: to Keeper:

Part A · The resource (condition).

MEASURE	LEADING OR LAGGING?	BASELINE	THIS PERIOD	WHAT IT COUNTS, AND WHAT IT DOES NOT
_____ (e.g. evenings worked per week)	Leading			
_____ (e.g. departures, emergency top-ups)	Lagging			
_____				

Part B · Use (by user, not only in total).

USER OR TEAM	ALLOCATION	DRAWN	GIVEN BACK (MAINTENANCE, DOCUMENTATION, OTHER)	NOTE

Spread: the highest draw against allocation is ; the lowest is .

Part C · The loops.

LOOP	MEASURE	BASELINE	THIS PERIOD
Sense	Average days from overuse to someone accountable knowing		
Reflex	Breaches this period; share settled at rung one		
Repair	Disputes raised; average days to settle; number that went around the agreed place		
Learning	Rule changes this period; who proposed them		
Door	People who joined; by what route; days taken		

Part D · Trust (start and end of each quarter only). Anonymous, one to five, with the number of people answering: *I expect the others to take their fair share and no more:* (n = ___). *A concern I raised would be heard fairly:* (n = ___).

Part E · The honest reading (written, five sentences).

The measure that disagrees with the others is

What changed for reasons other than our governing (season, a new client, a departure, regression from a crisis) may be

A figure that is missing, and why:

What the sheet cannot show, that the users told us:

The question we take to the next regular meeting is

Rule for the sheet: no reward or penalty is attached to any single line of it.

A note on method

The composite consultancy is the one followed in Chapter 8; its figures were set for illustration. The trust questions are this book's suggestion and have not been validated as a scale.

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