

THE SECOND BRIEF · CHAPTER NINE

How to Know It Worked

Chapter Nine of The Second Brief

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Chapter Nine of The Second Brief. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-second-brief (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989141).

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

In chapter 5, the café's owner spent her first two months counting the weight of waste she had diverted from the bin. It went up, satisfyingly, every week. And it told her almost nothing about whether anything was in better condition: not the gardens, not her staff, not the café's finances. She had measured a flow, and the question the book asks is about a stock. That mistake is the commonest one in regenerative practice, and it is made at every scale. A national economy measures what passes through it. A firm measures tonnes recycled, kilowatt-hours saved, trees planted. A household measures what it spent. Each of these is worth knowing. None of them answers the second brief's question, which is whether something the organisation depends on is in better condition than it was.

CHAPTER NINE

How to Know It Worked

The number that went up

In chapter 5, the café's owner spent her first two months counting the weight of waste she had diverted from the bin. It went up, satisfyingly, every week. And it told her almost nothing about whether anything was in better condition: not the gardens, not her staff, not the café's finances. She had measured a flow, and the question the book asks is about a stock.

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This chapter is about measurement: what to count, how to describe the things that resist counting, and how to read the results honestly when they arrive. It is the chapter a finance director or a sceptical board member is most likely to read closely, and it is written to survive that reading.

A warning that came with the first number

The best-known economic measure of all came with a warning from its maker. Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* tells the story in its chapter on what GDP measures and what it misses. When Simon Kuznets developed the national income accounts in the 1930s, the book notes, "Kuznets himself warned explicitly that GDP should not be used as a measure of welfare or wellbeing."[49] The book quotes his line: "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income."

The warning was ignored for the most ordinary of reasons. GDP was available, comparable and published every quarter. Welfare was none of those things. A measure that exists will be used for purposes it was not designed for, simply because it exists, and the same thing happens inside every organisation. A firm that reports tonnes recycled every month and the condition of its supply region never will, within a year, be managing tonnes recycled.

The book names the risk for alternative economic practice as well as for the conventional kind. It calls it measurement myopia:

> *If a cooperative measures its success only in financial terms, it will gradually drift toward extractive behavior.*[50]

And it is honest about the difficulty of the cure, which is measurement in several dimensions at once: "Designing such measurement systems is among the most important — and most difficult — practical challenges the movement faces."[50] This chapter does not solve that problem for every organisation. It sets out the distinctions and habits that make a practical start possible.

Five distinctions

Stock and flow

A stock is an amount that exists at a moment: the organic matter in a field's soil, the number of skilled bakers on the staff, the money in a reserve, the trust between a firm and its town. A flow is a rate of change: tonnes of compost added a year, hours of training given, money saved each month, complaints received.

Flows are easier to measure, because they pass a point where they can be counted. Stocks are what the second brief is about. The useful habit is to pair them. For every flow the programme reports, write down which stock it is meant to change, and how that stock's condition will be checked. Compost added is a flow; soil organic matter is the stock it is meant to raise. Training hours are a flow; the number of people who can run the morning bake alone is the stock. A programme that reports only flows is reporting effort, not effect.

Total and intensity

An intensity is a flow divided by something: energy per unit of production, water per tonne, emissions per pound of revenue. Intensities are useful for comparing a firm with itself as it grows, and for comparing firms of different sizes. They are also how a firm can report steady improvement while its total impact rises.

Chapter 6 noted that two of Interface's headline figures were per unit of production. That was a fair way to report a manufacturer's efficiency. It is not, on its own, an answer to the question of whether the climate system, the stock behind the emissions, was affected for better or worse. The habit is to report both: the intensity, to show efficiency, and the total, to show effect. If the total is not available, say so.

Baseline and trend

Every reduction is measured from somewhere. A baseline chosen in an unusually bad year flatters every later year. A baseline changed halfway through a programme makes the trend unreadable.

Choose the baseline before the programme starts, write down why it was chosen, and do not change it. If the business changes so much that the old baseline no longer makes sense, after an acquisition, say, report against both the old and the new for at least a year, so that the reader can see the join.

Leading and lagging

Some measures move quickly and some slowly. The number of exchanges running with neighbours can change in a month. The condition of a river may take a decade. A programme needs both: leading measures, which show whether the work is being done, and lagging measures, which show whether the work is having its effect.

Chapter 4 called the gap between them *time to show*. The leading measures are what a board can reasonably judge each quarter. The lagging measures are what it judges over the horizon written down in Decision 3 of the field manual. Confusing the two is how good programmes are cut: a board looks at the lagging measure after six months, sees no change, and concludes the programme has failed, when nothing could have shown yet.

Measured and described

Some stocks can be measured with instruments: soil organic matter, water quality, the amount of a material in circulation. Many that matter most cannot: the trust of a neighbourhood, the health of a supplier relationship, the morale of a team. For those, the honest course is a description, written so that someone outside could check it.

A good description has four properties. It is specific: not "good relations with suppliers" but "of our five largest suppliers, four say they would raise a quality problem with us before it reached a customer." It is sourced: it says whose view it is and how it was gathered. It is repeatable: the same questions can be asked of the same people in a year. And it is modest: it claims no more than the evidence holds. The café's owner wrote: *condition: slightly better in one bed, by the grower's account; not measured.* That sentence has all four properties, and it is worth more than a confident claim of regeneration.

Choosing the condition measure

The field manual asked for one condition measure to be added to the dashboard the leadership already reads. Choosing it is the most consequential measurement decision in the programme, and a few rules help.

It should describe the stock, not the programme's activity. "Compost delivered" is activity. "Soil organic matter in the supplying farms, as measured by the growers' own annual tests" is condition.

It should be checkable by someone outside. If only the programme's owner could say whether the measure has moved, it is a self-assessment, not a measure.

It should be cheap enough to repeat. A measure that requires an expensive survey will be taken once. A measure that requires three telephone calls a quarter will be taken for years.

It should be one the people who depend on the stock would recognise. The growers know what their soil is like. The workforce knows whether skills are improving. A measure that the people closest to the stock would dispute is measuring the wrong thing.

It should come with a written prediction. Before the programme starts, write down what the measure is expected to do and by when. This is the single most useful habit in this chapter. A prediction written in advance cannot be adjusted to fit the result, and a result compared with a prediction tells the organisation something, whichever way it falls.

Reading the results honestly

When the numbers arrive, five habits keep the reading honest.

Compare with the prediction, not with hope. If the prediction was that soil organic matter would rise measurably in two years, and after one year it has not moved, the programme is on schedule, not failing. If after three years it has not moved, the prediction was wrong, and the reason needs finding.

Look for something to compare against. A change in the stock may have nothing to do with the programme. A dry year, a new regulation, a competitor's closure can each move a condition measure. Where possible, find a comparison: a field that did not receive compost, a site that did not run the programme, the same measure in a neighbouring region. Without one, the honest statement is that the stock changed while the programme ran, not that the programme changed it.

Check what else moved. Chapter 3's rebound effect is a measurement problem as well as a design problem. A programme that improves one stock may deplete another, or increase a flow somewhere outside its boundary. The sceptic's job, at each review, is to ask what else changed.

Report the failures with the successes. Chapter 6 noted that celebrated cases are told without their failures. An organisation's own reporting should not repeat the habit. The decision log of chapter 8 records every item stopped and why. A review that shows two items stopped and one continuing is more credible to a board than one that reports only the survivor.

Write *not measured* where it is true. It is the most useful phrase in regenerative reporting and the one least often written. It tells the reader exactly where the evidence stops. It invites the question of how the thing

could be measured, which is the beginning of measuring it. And it protects the organisation from the slow erosion of credibility that follows every claim later found to have rested on nothing.

When the measure becomes the target

There is a well-known pattern in economics and management, usually credited to the economist Charles Goodhart: a measure that becomes a target tends to stop measuring what it was chosen to measure, because people learn to move the number rather than the thing behind it. Regenerative programmes are not immune. A team rewarded for tonnes diverted will divert tonnes. A supplier scored on a questionnaire will learn to answer the questionnaire.

Three defences help. Pair every target measure with a condition description that is harder to game, and read them together. Rotate the questions in a description from time to time, so that the people answering cannot rehearse. And keep the people who depend on the stock involved in describing it, because they have the least interest in a flattering number and the most in an accurate one.

Money, in the same table

The second brief does not ask an organisation to stop measuring money. Santa Anna's book is plain that financial sustainability is necessary, and most of the tools in this book carry a financial line. The habit that matters is to put money and condition in the same table, read in the same meeting.

A table with three columns, financial line, leading measures and condition of the chosen stock, read every quarter, does something no separate sustainability report can. It makes visible the trade-offs and the alignments. A quarter in which money rose and condition fell is a warning. A quarter in which condition rose and money held is evidence that the second brief and the business can live together. A quarter in which both rose is the one every programme is looking for, and when it comes it should be reported with its comparison and its caveats, like any other result.

A worked reading: the café's first year

The café of chapter 5 is a composite, and its figures are a teacher's. It still makes a useful worked example, because the way its owner might read her first year shows the habits of this chapter in use.

Her stock was the soil of the two market gardens that supply her vegetables. Its condition at the start was described, in the growers' words, as thin in one garden and good in the other, both short of organic matter after a dry summer. That is a description, sourced and modest. A better start would have added a measure, and the growers' own soil tests, taken each spring, would have supplied one at no cost to her.

Her prediction, had she written one, might have been that the bed receiving grounds would show more organic matter in the following spring's test than the bed that did not, and that the gardener would report better moisture through the summer. That prediction has a comparison built into it, the bed without grounds, and a date.

Her flows were grounds delivered, bread passed on, and the hours given to training a second baker. Each was a leading measure, easy to count and quick to move. She reported totals, which for a café is the natural choice.

Her financial line was a slightly smaller waste bill and a little more bread sold. Her *what else moved* column should have included the fresh-bread sales she watched to check that the day-old shelf was not diverting customers, which is a rebound check in miniature.

And her condition entry at six months, *slightly better in one bed, by the grower's account; not measured*, is exactly the honest entry this chapter recommends. At twelve months, with a spring soil test in hand and a comparison bed beside it, she could replace *not measured* with a number. If the number had not moved, she would have learned that a year is too short, or that grounds alone are not enough, and she would have the decision log to show what she did and when. Either result is worth more to her than a claim of regeneration made in the first month.

For the household

A household's version of all this is short. Choose one stock: the condition of the home, the health of the people in it, the garden's soil, the household's savings held for a bad month, the skills its members have. Describe its condition now in a sentence. Write down what you expect it to be in a year. Keep the ledger of chapter 2 for the flows. At the end of the year, compare the description with the prediction, and write *not measured* where you do not know.

Santa Anna's book offers a further measure for a household, and it is one no institution can take for it. In its weekly Vitality Inventory, it asks a person to notice, after each economic event, whether they felt more or less alive afterwards, and it argues that this measure is in some respects "more reliable than any financial spreadsheet". Chapter 11 takes up that practice.

The forest, measured

Santa Anna's book observes that in standard accounting a forest has value only when it is cut down. The remedy is not to stop counting timber. It is to count the forest as well: its soil, its water, the life it holds, described as carefully as the timber is weighed, and read in the same meeting.

The Tool: The Stock Card

One card for each stock the programme watches. It fits on a single page and is updated each quarter.

The stock- Name of the stock: __- Why the organisation depends on it: _- *Who else depends on it:* ___

How its condition is known- Measured (instrument, method, who measures, how often): __- Described (the questions asked, of whom, how often): _- *If neither yet: not measured, and the first step to measuring it:* ___

The prediction (written before the programme starts)- Baseline condition, and date: __- Expected condition at the first review, and date: _- *Expected condition at the end of the time to show, and date: - What would tell us the prediction was wrong:* ___

The flows meant to change it

FLOW	LEADING MEASURE	REPORTED TOTAL OR INTENSITY?	OWNER

The quarterly reading

QUARTER	FINANCIAL LINE	LEADING MEASURES	CONDITION (MEASURED OR DESCRIBED)	COMPARISON, IF ANY	WHAT ELSE MOVED	NOT MEASURED

How to read it. Read the condition column against the prediction, not against the previous quarter alone. Read the *what else moved* column before celebrating any result. Keep the *not measured* column full of honest entries until each one has been replaced by a measure or a description. A card that has stayed the same for four quarters, with every column filled, is the best evidence an organisation can have about its own second brief.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, chapter 2, "What the GDP Measures — and What It Misses Entirely". Developmental Canon, Luminous Prosperity Inc. Ava's library, file `020-ecstatic-economics.md`. The sentence on Kuznets's warning proven verbatim with `his-words`, 19 October 2026. The Kuznets line is quoted as the book gives it; it is commonly traced to Kuznets's 1934 report to the United States Senate, *National Income, 1929–1932*, which was not opened for this chapter.
2. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, chapter 4, "The Measurement Myopia". Ava's library, file `020-ecstatic-economics.md`. Both passages proven verbatim, 19 October 2026. "More reliable than any financial spreadsheet" is from the same book's chapter 3, Practice 5, "The Vitality Inventory", also proven.

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