

THE STANDING FOREST · CHAPTER EIGHT

How to Know It Worked

Chapter Eight of The Standing Forest

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Chapter Eight of The Standing Forest. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-standing-forest (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989542).

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 organisation that takes the ring seriously meets the same afternoon. The first honest number comes in, and it is worse than the one in last year's report. The energy use that the sustainability page described as falling turns out to have fallen per pound of revenue and risen in kilowatt-hours. The share of suppliers paid on time, which nobody had counted, turns out to be under half. The staff survey that reported high engagement turns out to have been answered by a third of the staff, mostly the happiest third. That afternoon decides whether the work continues. A team that reads the first honest number as a failure will, within a quarter, find a way to make the number look better without changing what it measures. A team that reads it as the first accurate picture it has ever had will keep going. This chapter is about the difference: what to count, in which units, and how to read the result honestly when it disappoints. It is the chapter most books on this subject leave out, and it is the one a leader most needs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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The first honest number

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Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* names the risk exactly, in a passage about co-operatives that applies to any organisation:

> *If a cooperative measures its success only in financial terms, it will gradually drift toward extractive behavior.*[67]

and it is candid about how hard the remedy is, calling the design of multi-dimensional measurement "among the most important — and most difficult — practical challenges the movement faces." The rest of this chapter takes that difficulty seriously.

Why a single number misleads

The case against GDP as a measure of welfare is the oldest in this subject, and Chapter 2 traced it to Kuznets in 1934. The most careful modern attempt to replace it is instructive, both for what it found and for what it could not do.

The Genuine Progress Indicator starts from personal consumption, adjusts it for the inequality of income, adds the value of household and volunteer work, and subtracts the costs of crime, pollution, the loss of farmland and forest, and other things GDP counts as gains or ignores. In 2013 Ida Kubiszewski, Robert Costanza and colleagues gathered GPI estimates for seventeen countries holding about half the world's population and reported, in *Ecological Economics*, that while global GDP had more than tripled since 1950, economic welfare as estimated by the GPI had decreased since 1978. They found that GPI per person peaked in 1978, at about the time humanity's ecological footprint first exceeded the planet's biocapacity, and that GPI per person did not increase beyond a GDP of around seven thousand dollars a person. They were also plain that the GPI is not a perfect welfare measure, only a far better approximation than GDP.[68]

The finding is striking, and it is fragile in a way a leader should understand. Every number in a GPI depends on a choice: how to value an hour of housework, what a lost hectare of wetland costs, how much to adjust for inequality. Change the choices and the curve moves. That is not a reason to dismiss the indicator. It is a reason to see that any single number which combines unlike things has hidden its judgements inside its arithmetic. The more a number aggregates, the more it asks you to trust whoever built it.

The lesson for an organisation is simple. Do not build a single index. Count each flow and each need in its own unit, and show them side by side. A board can hold six numbers in view. It cannot argue with a composite score whose weights it never chose.



What to count

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What to count

Three families of measure cover almost everything this book asks of an organisation. Each has a common way of going wrong.

The ceiling: flows in absolute units

Count each of your largest flows in its physical unit: kilowatt-hours, cubic metres, tonnes, litres, kilometres. Count it in total, not per unit of revenue.

The reason is the distinction Helmut Haberl and colleagues drew in their 2020 review of the decoupling evidence, discussed in Chapter 3. Relative decoupling, where a flow grows more slowly than revenue, is common. Absolute decoupling, where revenue grows and the flow actually falls, is rare.[69] An intensity figure, energy per pound, carbon per unit sold, can improve every year while the total rises every year. Intensity is a useful measure of efficiency. It is not a measure of where you stand against the ceiling. Report both, and lead with the absolute.

The common error is the moving boundary. A firm sells a subsidiary, or outsources a process, and its flows fall. Nothing has changed on the planet; the flows have moved to someone else's ledger. Count the flows you buy as well as the flows you make, at least for your largest materials, and say plainly when the boundary of what you count has changed.

The floor: needs met, by name

Count the needs the organisation exists to meet in terms of the people who have them. Not average pay, but the number of people paid below a living benchmark. Not a training budget, but hours of training received, by team. Not a supplier policy, but the number of suppliers paid within thirty days.

The reason is that averages hide the floor. A firm's average pay can rise while the lowest-paid team falls further behind. A floor is breached by people, one at a time, and it should be counted that way.

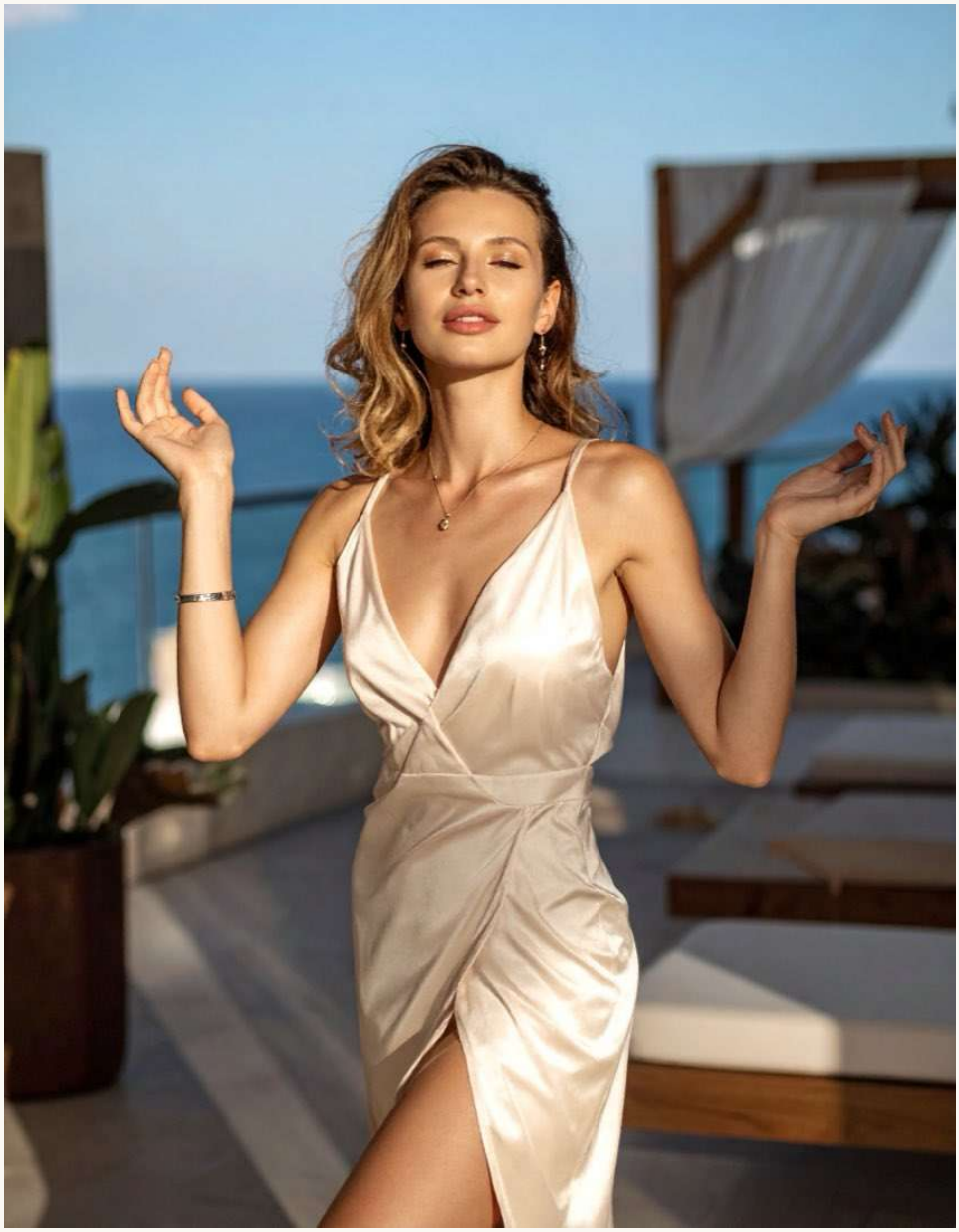
The common error is the convenient denominator. The share of staff paid a living wage looks better if contractors are left out. The share of suppliers paid on time looks better if it is weighted by value, because large suppliers are often paid fastest. Choose the denominator that would show the problem if there were one.

The third ring: signs of aliveness, read over time

Chapter 4 argued that an organisation can meet its floor and respect its ceiling and still be running on exhausted people, and that this matters. It also warned that felt aliveness is hard to measure, easy to fake and open to misuse. The way through is to count ordinary behaviour that has an ordinary record, and to read it over time rather than as a score.

Four signs serve most organisations: the share of annual leave actually taken; voluntary turnover, by team; the time between a problem appearing and someone raising it; and hours spent learning. None of them is a measure of happiness. Each is something a tired or frightened organisation does less of, and each has a record that nobody has to fill in a survey to produce.

The common error is to turn the signs into targets. A team told it must take all its leave will take it and answer emails from the beach. A team told to raise problems faster will raise trivial ones. Read the signs. Do not reward them.



How to read a number honestly

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How to read a number honestly

Collecting the figures is the easier half. Reading them is where most organisations go wrong, and five habits protect against it.

State the baseline before the first reading. Write down what you expect each number to be before you see it. When it comes in, the difference between expectation and reality is the most informative figure on the page, because it shows where the organisation's picture of itself was wrong.

Keep the boundary fixed, or say when it moves. A number that is compared with last year's must be counted the same way as last year's. When the boundary changes, an acquisition, a new site, a different way of counting contractors, recalculate last year on the new basis, or show both.

Separate what you did from what happened. Chapter 7's evaluators of the Costa Rican forest programme spent years separating the programme's effect from everything else that was happening at the same time. An organisation cannot run a controlled trial on itself, but it can ask, of every improvement: what else changed this year that might explain this? A mild winter lowers gas use. A recession lowers material throughput. Neither is an achievement.

Read the direction before the level. For most measures, whether the number is moving the right way matters more in the first two years than where it stands. A flow that is falling slowly from a high level is in a better place than one that is rising slowly from a low level.

Keep the bad line. When a number disappoints, keep it in the report for at least a year, with a sentence on what the organisation has learned from it. The temptation is to drop an awkward measure and replace it with a better-looking one. Charles Goodhart observed, in a 1975 paper on monetary policy, that a statistical regularity tends to collapse once pressure is placed on it for control purposes, and the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern later put the general point in the form most people now quote: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.[70] The protection is to keep the measures stable, to read them rather than reward them, and to let the bad lines stand where everyone can see them.

The report a board should see

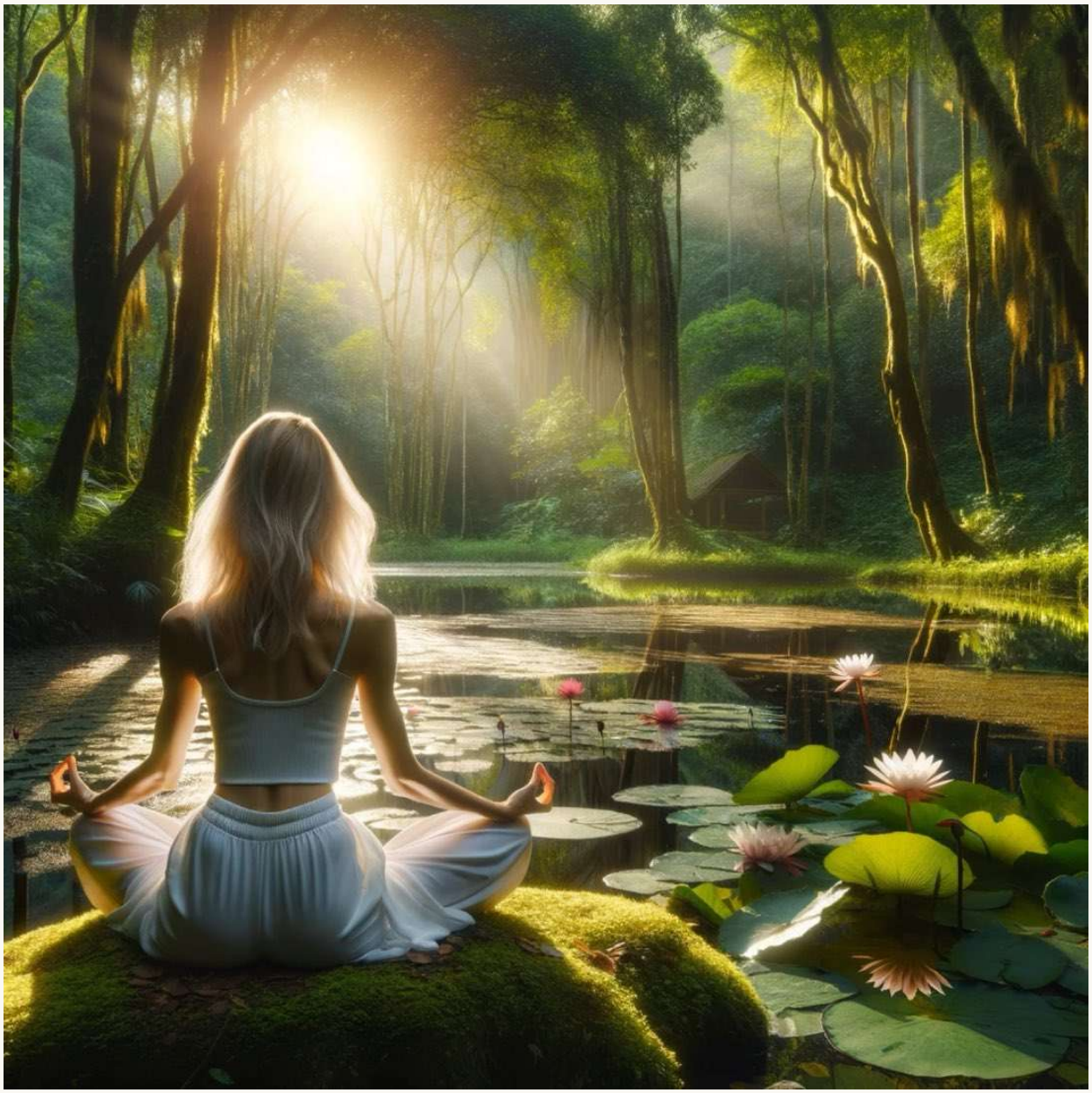
All of this fits on two pages, and the shape of those pages matters as much as their content.

Page one is the portrait. Four tables, one for each of the city portrait's lenses from Chapter 5: our people, our place, the people who supply us, and the planet. Each row is a measure in its own unit, this year's figure, last year's figure on the same basis, and the source. No index, no colours that suggest a target has been met, no arrows chosen by the person who wrote the report.

Page two is the reading. Three short paragraphs. The first says what moved and what the organisation thinks it did to move it, and what else might explain it. The second says which number disappointed, what

was expected and what was found. The third names the one or two measures the organisation still cannot produce, and what it would take to produce them. A report with no third paragraph is either very unusual or not yet honest.

Wales, in Chapter 6, required its public bodies to publish their shortfall, and gave an independent office the job of reading it. A board can do the same with its keeper. The person who reads page two aloud at the annual meeting should not be the person whose performance it describes.



A dashboard, read

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A dashboard, read

Return to Harrow & Vale, the composite furniture maker of Chapter 5, built for teaching; its figures are the writer's, not any company's. A year after drawing its first portrait, its ring lead produces the first Honest Dashboard. Three readings on page two show how the habits above work in practice.

What moved. Gas use fell from 2.6 gigawatt-hours to 2.3. The ring lead's first draft credited the new kiln controls installed in the spring. The keeper asked what else had changed, and the answer was the weather: the winter had been mild, and the firm's own heating-degree figures, available free from its energy supplier, showed about a tenth less heating demand than the year before. Corrected for the weather, the kiln controls accounted for perhaps a third of the fall. The paragraph on page two says so. It is a smaller claim and a believable one.

What disappointed. Timber bought rose from 2,300 cubic metres to 2,450 while revenue rose four per cent. The intensity figure, timber per pound of revenue, barely moved, which the old sustainability page would have reported as stable. In absolute terms, the firm took more wood from forests this year than last. The certified share rose from sixty-four to seventy-one per cent, which is real progress, and the paragraph reports both figures together, because either alone would mislead.

What we still cannot measure. Storm water leaving the site is now measured, thanks to the summer student's logger; that blank has been filled. Two remain: the wages paid by the two overseas hardware suppliers, who have not answered, and the condition of the soil in the forests the uncertified timber comes from, which nobody can see. The paragraph names both and says what it would take: a visit to one supplier, and a decision to stop buying untraceable wood. The second is a board decision, and the dashboard puts it on the board's agenda without making it.

Nothing on these two pages is a composite index, and nothing is coloured green. A board member reading them can see in five minutes where the firm stands, where it has moved, and what it does not know. That is the whole purpose.

Measurement for a household

A household needs less of all of this, and the principles are the same. Count one or two flows in their own units: kilowatt-hours from the meter, litres from the water bill, kilometres from the odometer, the weight of a week's food waste in the bin. Write the number down once a week on a sheet by the kettle. Count the household's floor by name: who in the house has a need that is short this month. And notice the signs of aliveness the way a family already does, without scoring them: who is sleeping, who is laughing, who has gone quiet.

The household's equivalent of the board report is a conversation once a month at a meal. What moved, what surprised us, what is short. Chapter 11 sets it out.

What this chapter cannot settle

There is no agreed standard for measuring an organisation's place in the ring, and this chapter does not offer one. The measures suggested here are deliberately ordinary, chosen because their records already exist and because they are hard to fake. They will miss things. An organisation's share of a planetary boundary depends on a fairness rule, as Chapter 3 showed, and no measure settles that rule. Felt aliveness will never be captured by four behaviours. What the chapter does claim is that a small set of honest, stable, unaggregated measures, read carefully over several years, will tell an organisation more about whether the work is working than any index, and that the habit of reading them honestly is itself the change.

The Tool: The Honest Dashboard

Two pages, produced once a year and reviewed at the board or household meeting. A shorter version, page one only, can be produced each quarter.

Before the first year. For each measure, write one line: the measure, its unit, its source, the denominator, and what you expect the first figure to be. Seal the expectations in an envelope, or a dated file, until the first figures come in.

Page one · The portrait.

LENS	MEASURE	UNIT	THIS YEAR	LAST YEAR (SAME BASIS)	SOURCE	BOUNDARY CHANGED?
Our people						
Our place						
Their people						
The planet						
Signs of aliveness						

Six to twelve rows in all. Absolute units first; add an intensity figure beside a flow only if the reader also sees the absolute.

Page two · The reading.

1 · *What moved.* Up to five sentences: the largest change, what we think caused it, and what else might have.

2 · *What disappointed.* Up to five sentences: the measure furthest from our sealed expectation, and what it teaches.

3 · *What we still cannot measure.* Up to three sentences: the blank rows, and what it would take to fill them.

Four rules.

1 · No composite score.

2 · No measure is dropped in the year it disappoints.

3 · No measure becomes a target for an individual's pay.

4 · Page two is read aloud by someone other than the person whose work it describes.

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3. Haberl, H., Wiedenhofer, D., Virág, D., Kalt, G., et al. (2020). A systematic review of the evidence on decoupling of GDP, resource use and GHG emissions, part II: synthesizing the insights. *Environmental Research Letters*, 15(6), 065003. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab842a.
4. Goodhart, C. A. E. (1975), "Problems of monetary management: the U.K. experience", Reserve Bank of Australia conference paper; Strathern, M. (1997), "'Improving ratings': audit in the British university system", *European Review*, 5(3). Both are paraphrased; neither was re-read for this book, and the popular wording is Strathern's generalisation, not Goodhart's sentence.

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