

WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER FIVE

A Number Both Sides Can Sign

A gain can be shared only when both sides trust the count, so the measure is agreed first and read last.

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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THE LICENCE

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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

A gain can be shared only when both sides trust the count, so the measure is agreed first and read last. It is twenty to eight on the last evening of the quarter, and the finance director is the only person left on the floor. On her screen is the scrap report for the plant, and it says what the plant manager has been saying in the corridor for a fortnight: scrap is down by about a third since the summer. Beside the keyboard is a printed sheet she has been asked to sign. It confirms the saving, so that the team on the line, who changed how the presses are set up at the start of each shift, can be paid the share of it they were promised in the spring. She believes the team did something real. She has seen the new set-up sheets taped to the presses. But she also knows three other things, and they sit in her stomach like a stone. The plant changed its steel supplier in August, and the new coil is more consistent. Volumes were low in the autumn, and the presses ran slower.

CHAPTER FIVE

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A Number Both Sides Can Sign

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER FIVE

Twenty to eight, the last spreadsheet of the quarter

It is twenty to eight on the last evening of the quarter, and the finance director is the only person left on the floor. On her screen is the scrap report for the plant, and it says what the plant manager has been saying in the corridor for a fortnight: scrap is down by about a third since the summer. Beside the keyboard is a printed sheet she has been asked to sign. It confirms the saving, so that the team on the line, who changed how the presses are set up at the start of each shift, can be paid the share of it they were promised in the spring.

She believes the team did something real. She has seen the new set-up sheets taped to the presses. But she also knows three other things, and they sit in her stomach like a stone. The plant changed its steel supplier in August, and the new coil is more consistent. Volumes were low in the autumn, and the presses ran slower. And the summer, against which the autumn is being compared, was the worst quarter for scrap the plant has had in three years. Any of the three could account for some of the fall. She has no way, at twenty to eight, to say how much.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these evenings are described in the literature on measurement and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. If she signs, and the number is partly the steel, the share is paid on a gain the team did not entirely make, and the next time a saving is claimed nobody in finance will believe it. If she refuses, the team that did change the presses learns that its work counts for nothing, and the next idea stays on the floor.

On the line, the same evening, the team leader is finishing a late shift, and his view of the quarter is simpler. In April his people noticed that most of the scrap came from the first hour after each changeover, when the presses were set up from memory by whoever was on, and that the best setters on each shift did it differently from the rest. They wrote the best set-ups down, taped them to the machines, and asked everyone to use them. They did this on their own time, at first, because they were tired of throwing away good steel. He knows his people did something. He does not know about the summer's bad luck or the new coil, and nobody has told him that the number his team will be paid on is being weighed against them. If the share is refused, he will hear only that the work did not count.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, writing on how organisations judge contribution, is careful not to take the easy side of her dilemma.[32] "It is not that measurement is bad," it says. "Measurement is essential. The problem is the adequacy claim". The adequacy claim is the belief that the right metric, found in time, captures the whole of what people contributed. The scrap report is a good metric. It is not adequate, on its own, to tell her whose gain this is.

This chapter makes one claim, and it closes the argument the four chapters before it have made. A gain can be shared only if it is measured in a way both sides believe, and almost all of that belief is earned before anyone knows the answer: in a baseline agreed from records already kept, in adjustments named in ad-

vance, and in a calculation that someone other than the interested parties can check. The finance director's difficulty at twenty to eight is not a failure of arithmetic. It is a decision that was not made in the spring.

The lights at Hawthorne

The most famous measurement in the history of management is also one of the most misremembered. In the mid-1920s, at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works outside Chicago, engineers ran a series of experiments on whether brighter lighting made factory workers more productive. The story that later spread through management textbooks was remarkable: output rose when the lights were turned up, and rose again when they were turned down, and rose in the groups whose lighting did not change at all. The explanation offered was that the workers were responding not to the light but to being studied, and the phenomenon was named the Hawthorne effect. The later and better-documented studies at the same plant were written up by Fritz Roethlisberger and William Dickson in *Management and the Worker* (1939), and they shaped a generation of thinking about attention, morale and output.[33]

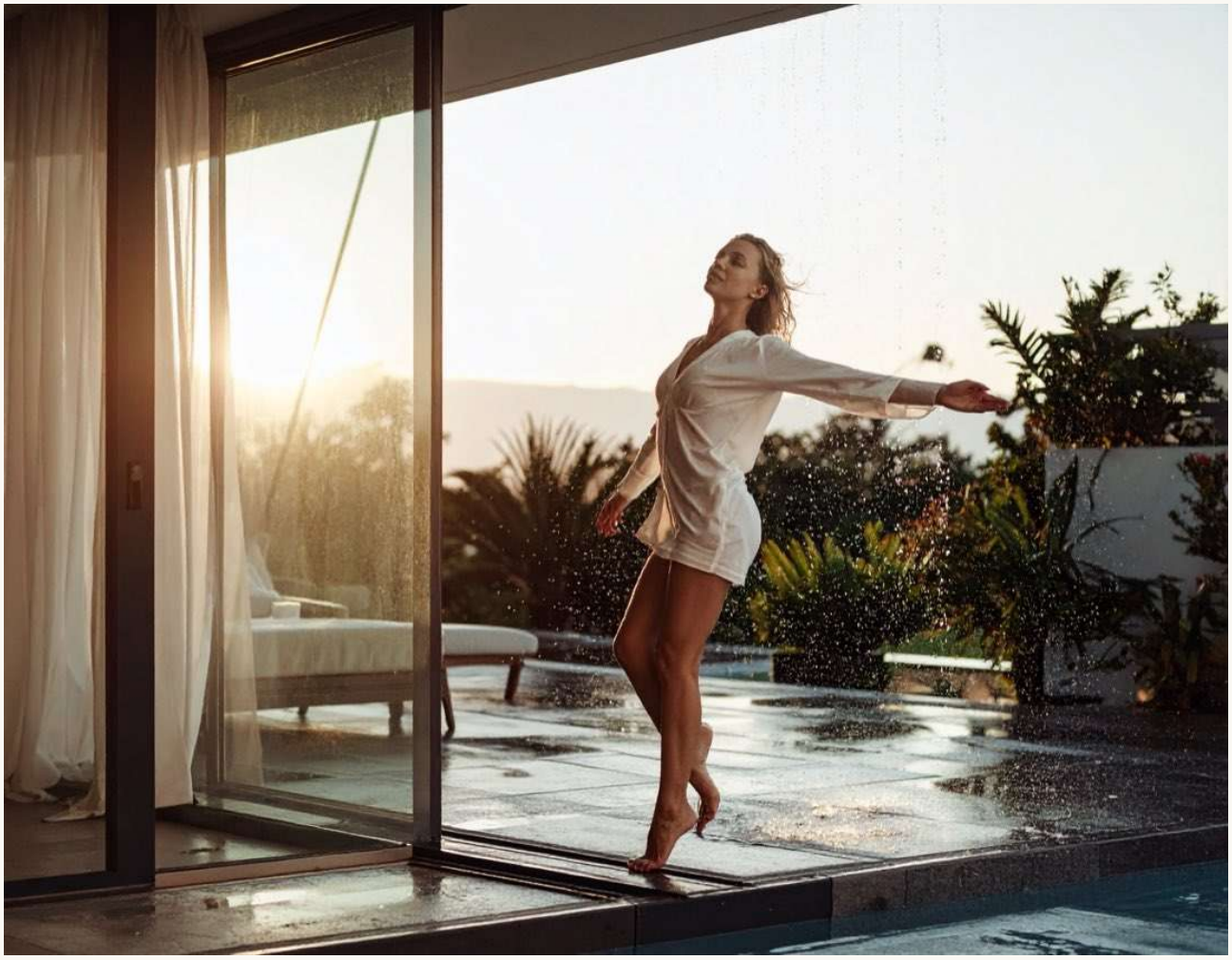
For decades the data from the original lighting experiments were thought to have been lost. In 2011 the economists Steven Levitt and John List reported that they had found them, and they analysed them formally for the first time.[34] Their abstract is unusually blunt for an economics journal: "Existing descriptions of supposedly remarkable data patterns prove to be entirely fictional." They did find subtler signs that might be Hawthorne effects, and they proposed a way to test for them. But the dramatic pattern that had been taught to so many students, output rising whatever was done, was not in the records.

The episode is a parable for the finance director, and in two directions. The first is that a striking improvement after an intervention can be produced by things other than the intervention: by attention, by the season, by the way the measure was taken. The plant's scrap fell after the new set-up sheets went up. So did the summer end. The second is that the story of an improvement can outlive the evidence for it by eighty years, if nobody goes back to the records. A gain that is shared on a story, rather than on a measurement both sides agreed, is a gain that the next sceptic can dissolve.

There is a fairer reading of attention, too, and it matters to the team. Being watched is not only a source of false improvement. It is often how real improvement starts: people who know their work is being looked at, by someone who cares about the result, look at it more closely themselves. The line team's set-up sheets began because somebody asked about scrap. The difficulty is not that attention changes behaviour. It is that, without a measurement agreed in advance, nobody can tell which part of a change was the attention, which the season and which the work, and so the people who did the work are the ones most likely to be under-credited or over-credited, and never simply credited.

The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, has a dry line about the most elaborate measurement discipline in modern operations, and it applies to the scrap report as well:

"The discipline is valuable; the cult-like belt system is optional." What matters is not the ceremony around the number. It is whether the number would survive someone going back to the records.



A bad summer

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A bad summer

The second of the finance director's worries has a name, and a history that begins with sweet peas and the heights of children. In 1886 the statistician Francis Galton published a paper on the inheritance of stature, *Regression Towards Mediocrity in Hereditary Stature*.[35] He had measured parents and their grown children, and found that the children of unusually tall parents tended to be tall, but less unusually so; the children of unusually short parents tended to be short, but less so. Their heights, as he put it, regressed towards the average. Galton thought he had found something about heredity. He had found something about measurement: whenever a quantity varies partly by chance, an extreme value tends to be followed by one closer to the middle, whatever anyone does.

Regression to the mean is the most reliable source of false improvement in organisations, and it is at work on the finance director's screen. The summer was the plant's worst quarter for scrap in three years. That is precisely why the line team was asked, in the spring, to do something about scrap: problems attract attention at their peak. And a measure chosen at its peak will, on average, fall afterwards even if nothing is done. Some of the autumn's improvement was the summer's bad luck not repeating.

The same company that ran the Hawthorne lights also produced the best-known instrument for telling the difference. In the 1920s Walter Shewhart, a physicist at the Bell Telephone Laboratories working with Western Electric's manufacturing, developed the control chart, and in 1931 set out its reasoning in *Economic Control of Quality of Manufactured Product*.[36] Every process, his argument ran, shows variation. Some of it is the ordinary noise of a stable system, and some signals that something has genuinely changed, and a manager who reacts to the first as if it were the second will make the process worse, not better. W. Edwards Deming later popularised the distinction as common-cause and special-cause variation. The practical form is modest: plot the measure over a long enough period to see its ordinary range, and treat a point as news only when it falls outside that range or forms a pattern within it. It is the oldest protection there is against reading a bad summer as a baseline.

None of this means the team's work did nothing. It means that the size of what it did cannot be read off a comparison between the worst quarter and the one after it. A baseline drawn from a longer period, a year or two of the plant's ordinary variation, would have shown what a normal quarter looked like, and the autumn could have been compared with that. It would also have protected the team. A baseline taken from a single bad quarter flatters the first period after a change and then punishes every period after that, as the improvement settles into the ordinary range and the comparison stops looking dramatic.

There is a quieter lesson in Galton for anyone who runs a team. A leader who praises the people with the best quarter and corrects those with the worst will tend to see the praised do worse and the corrected do better next time, whatever the praise or the correction contributed, and may conclude that correction works and praise does not. *The Margin*, another of the house's books, reads [what a number beside a name does to the person who reads it](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/). Read with Galton, much of what a score seems to say about a person in one period is simply the noise of the period.

When the measure becomes the target

The finance director has a third worry, which she has not yet admitted to herself, and it concerns the next quarter rather than this one. If the team is paid on scrap, scrap will be watched. And a number that is watched in order to pay people tends to change in ways that have nothing to do with what it was meant to measure.

The management literature has been saying so for half a century. In 1975 Steven Kerr published a paper whose title has become a proverb, *On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B*.[37] Organisations, he argued from a series of cases, routinely reward one behaviour while hoping for another, and then are surprised to get what they rewarded. Four years later the social scientist Donald Campbell, writing on the evaluation of public programmes, put the danger more formally: the more a quantitative indicator is used to make social decisions, the more it is exposed to pressures that corrupt it, and the more it tends to distort the very processes it was meant to monitor.[38] In 1997 the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, writing about the audit of British universities, gave the idea its best-known modern phrasing, usually credited to the economist Charles Goodhart: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. Her own abstract puts the deeper point in a sentence any finance director could pin above her desk. Audit, she wrote, "does more than monitor—it has a life of its own that jeopardizes the life it audits."[39]

These are arguments and case studies, not trials, and they should be weighed that way. But the mechanism they describe is easy to picture on the plant floor. Scrap can be reduced by better set-ups. It can also be reduced by reclassifying marginal parts as rework, by slowing the presses, or by running only the easy jobs at the end of the month. A lead time can be shortened the same way, by closing orders early, as the order desk in Chapter 2 was tempted to. A share paid on scrap alone invites all of these, not because the team is dishonest but because people do, in the end, what they are paid for.

Santa Anna's canon draws the line between what can and cannot be counted in a sentence that keeps the measurement and refuses its overreach. "You can measure proxies for trust — survey scores, retention rates, willingness to speak up in meetings. But trust itself is not a number." The same is true of the team's contribution. The scrap rate is a proxy for it, a good one, and the moment the proxy is treated as the thing itself, it begins to drift.

His *Ecstatic Economics* states the principle underneath, and it is the reason the design of a shared measure matters so much: "Money is not neutral. It is a design system, and the design shapes the behavior." A share of a gain, tied to a number, is a piece of design. It will shape what the team does. The question is only whether it was designed to.

There is a simple guard against the drift, and it is old enough to be ordinary. A measure that pays people should almost never travel alone. Beside the scrap rate, a second measure that would rise if scrap were merely moved somewhere else: rework hours, or customer returns, or the speed of the presses. The second measure is not there because the team is suspected. It is there because the team deserves a number that cannot be accused of gaming, and a lonely metric can always be accused.

Savings measured against a baseline

All of this could be read as a counsel of despair, as if no gain could ever be measured well enough to share. The opposite is true, and there is a whole industry that proves it.

For several decades, public agencies in the United States have bought energy improvements to their buildings through energy savings performance contracts. The Department of Energy's Federal Energy Management Program describes them as a way to pursue savings "with no up-front capital costs": a specialist company installs the improvements, and the savings, measured, are what make the arrangement work.[40] The measurement is governed by an international protocol, IPMVP, maintained by the Efficiency Valuation Organization, which writes savings as the baseline minus the energy used in the reporting period, plus or minus adjustments stated in advance.[41]

What makes this relevant to the finance director is not the energy. It is how carefully the measurement is arranged, and when. The programme's guidance on measurement and verification is plain about the baseline. Savings are found by comparing it with the energy used after installation, and once the improvements are installed, "it is impossible to re-create the baseline," so "it is very important to properly define and document the baseline conditions." The plan must also specify, before any saving is counted, "How and why the baseline may be adjusted." A hot summer, a building that gains a floor, a change in opening hours: each is named before it happens, with the method for allowing for it.

That is the shape a shared gain needs, and it can be said in a paragraph without giving away the work of any particular engagement. A baseline that both sides lock at the start, drawn from records the organisation already keeps, over a period long enough to show its ordinary variation. Adjustments for the things that will move the number for reasons nobody controls, named and agreed in advance, with how each will be calculated. A calculation done, or checked, by someone with no stake in the answer. And the result shown to the people whose work produced it, in a form they can read. Which records, which period, which adjustments, which thresholds, and how the share itself is set are questions for each organisation and the people it covers, and they are the substance of an engagement rather than an article. The principle does not depend on them. A gain measured this way is not a story about improvement. It is a number both sides agreed to believe before either knew what it would say.

The independent calculation deserves a word, because it is the part most often skipped. The finance director is not a disinterested party; she runs a budget, and the share is a cost to it. The plant manager is not disinterested either; his standing rises with the saving. Neither of them is dishonest, and neither of them should be the last person to touch the number. A calculation run by someone whose standing does not depend on the answer, in a form both can audit, is what lets each side trust a figure that the other produced. The energy contracts build this in. Most internal schemes for sharing gains do not, and that, more than any formula, is why so many of them end in an argument about the number.

The Luminous 100 makes a remark about the balanced scorecard, the best-known attempt to measure a firm from several directions at once, that applies here: "The strategy map connecting the four perspectives is often more valuable than the scorecard itself." The agreed baseline is the equivalent. Most of its value is in the conversation that produced it, in which the finance director, the plant manager and the team leader

said in the spring what they would count, and why, and what would not count. The number in the autumn is only the end of that conversation.

It is worth saying who that conversation protects most, because the answer is not finance. A measurement agreed in advance protects the people who found the gain. Without it, their share depends on the mood of the quarter, the scepticism of whoever signs, and the story the plant manager tells in the corridor. With it, the share depends on what they did, counted by rules they saw before they started. The people closest to the work, the subject of Chapter 4, are, in nearly every organisation, the ones with least power to argue about a number after the fact. A baseline locked in the spring is the one moment at which they stand on equal terms with everyone else at the table, and it is the moment at which an honest share is decided, long before anyone knows how large it will be.



Signing it

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Signing it

Picture the same finance director a year later, in the same office, at the same hour.

In January, before anyone on the line changed anything, she sat down with the plant manager and the team leader and agreed what they would measure. Scrap, as a share of steel used, over the previous two years rather than the previous quarter, so that the baseline showed the plant's ordinary range. An adjustment for the grade of steel, because the supplier might change again, calculated from the incoming inspection records the plant already keeps. An adjustment for volume, because the presses behave differently when they run slowly. A second measure beside scrap, rework hours, so that reclassifying a scrapped part as a reworked one would show. And a promise that the plant's management accountant, who reports to her and not to the plant, would run the numbers, and that the team would see them every month, on the board by the presses, in the same form she would.

The first conversation was harder than she expected. The plant manager wanted the baseline taken from the summer, because it would make the team's gain look larger, and she had to explain, kindly, that a baseline chosen at the worst point protects nobody: it flatters the first quarter and punishes every quarter after. The team leader wanted rework left out, because rework was another department's problem, and agreed to include it when she pointed out that it was the one measure that would protect the team from the suspicion of moving scrap into rework. Each disagreement took ten minutes. Each would have taken a month to settle in the autumn, after the number was known, when every party would have known which answer favoured them. It was, she thought afterwards, the corridor conversation of Chapter 1 held at the table, before there was a number to argue over.

The team saw the figures every month on the board by the presses, plotted as Shewhart would have plotted them, against the two-year range. In March the line went up, not down, because a batch of steel from the old supplier came in late, and the adjustment the accountant had agreed caught it, and the team leader, looking at the board, saw his people's work protected by a rule he had argued against in January. That was the month the team stopped regarding the measurement as finance's and started regarding it as theirs. In June, when a set-up sheet on one press turned out to be wrong, it was the team that noticed the number and fixed the sheet, before anyone in the office asked. Chapter 7 carries the run sheet for this practice, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days. It does not carry the design of any particular gainshare, which belongs to the organisation and the people it covers.

Every place where an organisation's knowledge stops moving, the corridor, the queue, the notebook and the front line, holds a gain, and none of those gains can be shared until it can be measured in a way both sides believe. That is why the measure is agreed first, and read last.

The oldest attempts to share such gains, and the long record of what made them work and fail, are read in The Gain Was Always Shared.

The argument that a firm is a living system whose value is created by its people, and should circulate back to them, is the subject of Ecstatic Economics.

The house's interest in this is not academic, and it is stated once, plainly. Luminous Prosperity works with organisations to find the gains they already hold, where work and knowledge have stopped moving, and to share in what is found. Sharing is only honest when the measurement is, which is why the house has spent this much of a chapter on the part most consultancies leave to the end.

The measurement conversation, in practice

The finance director's January conversation is the part of this book most worth doing carefully, and the part most often rushed. The finer points below are about how the conversation is held, not about the design of any particular gainshare, which belongs to the organisation and the people it covers.

Hold it before anyone knows the answer. Everything in this chapter depends on timing. A baseline agreed before a change is made is a shared expectation. A baseline agreed after the results are in is a negotiation, and every party will know which answer favours them. If a team has already begun to change its work, agree the measurement now, from now, and accept that the earlier improvement will not be counted. That is a cost, and it is far smaller than the cost of a number nobody trusts.

Have the right people in the room. At least four perspectives need to be present: the person responsible for the money, the person responsible for the operation, someone who speaks for the people whose work will produce the gain, and the person who will do the calculation. If the last of these reports to one of the first two, say so, and agree how the calculation can be checked by someone who does not.

Start with what is being changed, not with the measure. The first question is what the team intends to do differently, in plain words. Only then: what would change in the organisation's existing records if it worked? This order matters because a measure chosen first tends to choose the work, and the work then bends towards the measure, which is the folly Kerr described.

Use records that already exist. A measure that requires new data is a measure that can be disputed. Scrap rates, rework hours, lead times, overtime, returns and complaints are usually recorded already, by people with no stake in the gain. Prefer them.

Look at a long enough history. Plot the measure over a period long enough to see its ordinary range, a year or two where the records allow, and agree what an ordinary quarter looks like before agreeing what an improved one would be. Shewhart's chart is the oldest tool for this and still the clearest. A baseline drawn from the worst recent period, however tempting, flatters the first results and punishes every later one.

Name what will move the number for reasons nobody controls. Volume, the grade of a material, the weather, a price, a change in the mix of work. For each, agree in advance whether it will be adjusted for, from

which record, and how. An adjustment invented after the results are known will be read, correctly, as the side that lost trying to win.

Pair every measure with one that would expose gaming. Scrap with rework. Lead time with complaints. Overtime with backlog. The second measure protects the team as much as the firm, because it is what allows an honest result to be believed.

Agree how the result will be shown. The people whose work produced the gain should see the same figures, in the same form, at the same time as finance. A result that the team first hears about in an announcement is a result the team has no reason to trust.

Write it down, and sign it. One page, in plain words, with the measure, the history, the adjustments, the balancing measure, who calculates and how the result is shown. It is the page the finance director signed in January, and it is why the page she signed at twenty to eight a year later took ten minutes.

What this conversation does not settle, and what this book does not describe, is how a measured gain is then shared: the proportions, the timing, the thresholds, and the terms. Those depend on the organisation, its people and its history, and they are the substance of an engagement. Chapter 6 places the measurement conversation at the end of a first ninety days, after the work it will measure has been found, and Chapter 7 gives the questions in order as a single page.

Twenty to eight, a year later

It is twenty to eight on the last evening of the quarter, and the finance director is the only person left on the floor. On her screen is the management accountant's report, which she has already read twice, and which says the same thing as the board by the presses: scrap is down against the two-year baseline, after the adjustment for steel and the adjustment for volume, and rework has not risen. The figure is smaller than the plant manager's corridor estimate. It is also, for the first time, a figure nobody on either side will dispute.

The printed sheet is beside the keyboard. Her stomach, which a year ago held a stone at this hour, holds nothing in particular. The decisions that made the number trustworthy were made in January, in a room, before anyone knew what it would say.

She signs it, and turns off the light.

A NOTE FROM THE HOUSE

A gain can be shared only when both sides trust the count, so the measure is agreed first and read last. That is the whole discipline of a gainshare. Luminous Prosperity Inc. brings it into organisations, and is paid as a share of the gain it helps find.

REQUEST A CONVERSATION

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A Number Both Sides Can Sign

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