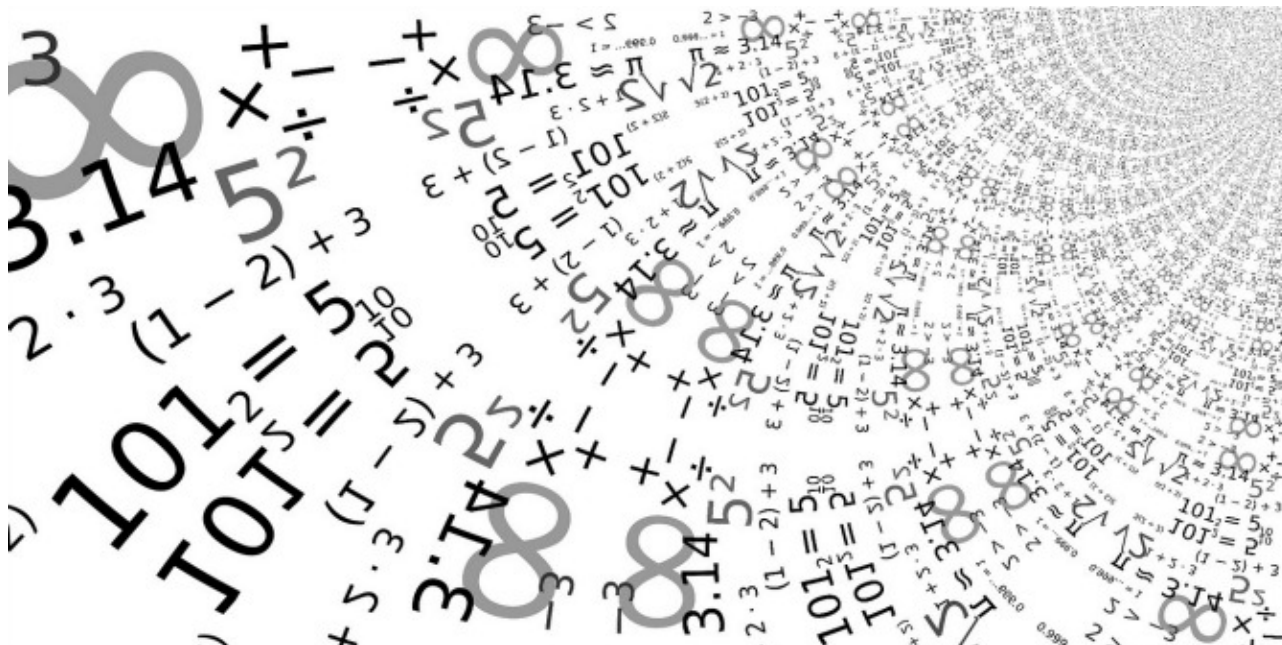


# What gets measured gets distorted

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/09/19/what-gets-measured-gets-distorted/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/09/19/what-gets-measured-gets-distorted/)

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## Real Leadership

Something strange is happening to leadership at work. The old truths don't seem to work anymore. Today's leaders are not really sure which way to go. It used to be seen that every 'leader' needed 'followers', a hierarchy where people saw their future in the organisation and compliance was the order of the day. When insecurity crept in, malevolent obedience often took over or we looked for other opportunities to progress. Then in the 1990s the bonus culture emerged, a regime where both leaders and followers were captured and motivated purely by money.

## Measurement, targets and money

The bonus culture had to be supported and maintained by measurement. What gets measured gets done. Decades later the obverse proved to be true. **What gets measured gets distorted**. Bankers' bonuses were seen as the totem pole of excellent performance and leadership. Except that the tail wagged the dog and the banks that were "too big to fail" had to be bailed out by the taxpayer.

The public sector was not exempt. In the NHS for example 'health' inputs had to be measured. Leadership said that national targets were the way forward, bolstered by a 'name and shame' media culture. Then strangely, hospital staff were encouraged to become gamblers and adept at 'gaming' health statistics. Patients on trolleys in corridors outside A&E so as not to count against the four-hour wait target; patients being put back to the start time of their procedure if they couldn't make an appointment or operation date. Many NHS hospitals appear to be 'gaming' the system to meet performance targets, in some cases changing the way they care for patients or deliberately 'fiddling figures' according to a report by the [Dr Foster Group](#) in 2015. A high stakes bet ignoring the actual experience of the patient and their very real health outcomes.

This is not to say that measuring progress, performance and productivity is just smoke and mirrors. Any organisation, public or private, needs to be accountable as a whole to its stakeholders. This accountability is not just

for the boardroom, but right down to teams and individuals who are crucial to effective accountability.

The crucial difference is, firstly, that measurement needs to be accurate, realistic and representative of performance; not top-down targets invented to satisfy a whim or individual ego. Secondly, measurement needs to be owned by the teams and individuals, after interaction with the hierarchy on how these aims fit with overall accountability.

There are some well evidenced examples of effective measurement that not only improves productivity, but at the same time develops and encourages those involved. Against conventional wisdom in clinical surgery, the American surgeon and author Atal Gawande has demonstrated that simple application of checklists in the operating theatre gives consistently improved patient outcomes and lowered mortality rates (*The Checklist Manifesto*: Profile Books 2011). Matthew Syed's study into 'marginal gains' operated by Team Sky, GB Olympic cycling team and others (*Black Box Thinking*: John Murray 2015) demonstrates that finite incremental improvement and experimentation in an atmosphere of trust where 'learning by failure' as an accepted norm delivers fantastic results and competitiveness.

Sixty years ago Edwards Deming, the father of today's quality movement, advocated 'continuous improvement' in a climate of openness that 'drives out fear' as opposed to the 'blame culture' that is often evident. These policies have since been successfully applied in manufacturing (Morton, C. *Becoming World Class*: Macmillan 1994) Those seeking real leadership could still benefit from these models of how to lead.

### **Has PR trumped reality?**

For many organisations the leadership 'product' is image. Reputation management is a science of its own. In politics this has become the leitmotif. Our former prime minister(s) were famous for it, in particular David Cameron, for whom the issue of the PR image became dominant. The recent BREXIT experience had fear as a common trademark for both IN and LEAVE camps. However, the IN camp focussed on the economic dis-benefits of leaving the EU, using what might be termed 'left brain' analysis, which seemed sensible and rational to the elite and the establishment, but to the millions voting LEAVE it was a fog of statistics that was not relevant to their experience. They voted on their emotions – what felt right to them.

### **Have we allowed the 'left brain' to dominate leadership's decision-making?**

Psychiatrist, philosopher and author Iain McGilchrist has studied the structure and functioning of the brain over many years and has concluded that the 'divided brain' – between left and right sides, is not operating as designed and that over centuries, instead of the two sides being complementary and supportive, the western world has allowed the 'left brain' to dominate. McGilchrist argues that the left and right hemispheres have differing insights, values and priorities. Each has a distinct perspective on the world – most strikingly, the right hemisphere sees itself as connected to the world, whereas the left hemisphere stands aloof from it. (*The Master and his Emissary*: Yale 2009).

What this means is that decision-making at government and political level, as well as in business and organisations has put analysis and tangible facts at a much higher order than creativity, emotions, connectedness and the bigger picture.

It means that leadership has often used the wrong language and rationale to convince itself and the populace; a populace which has now reacted and rejected the rationale of the elite as evidenced by the BREXIT result, and currently the schism within the Labour Party.

### **What does this mean for 'real leadership' in practice?**

Leaders need to encompass the complementarity of the two hemispheres of the brain, embracing intuition and ambiguity as well as hard facts and structural solutions.

Connectivity is vital, asking the transformative questions: who can we work with? Who else can we learn from? Can

we build bridges across boundaries to learn and act? Do we need to tackle the problem in the way we always have done? Have we involved all those with differing backgrounds/diverse views?

Successful organisations show that team-working and understanding of difference within organisations is the starting point, flowing through to effective change processes, partnership and innovation with others to provide connectivity. It is about both listening and the language we use to promote understanding and meaning at work. This provides for growth of leaders as well as for the organisations and the people that they manage.

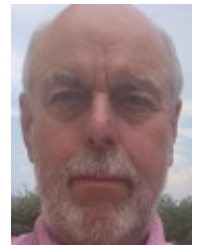
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Notes:

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