THE MISDIRECTION OF METRICS

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How do you measure the effectiveness of a mission agency home office?

This question isn't as easy to answer as it might first appear.

You could measure the impact of the mission on the field; the number of churches planted, Bibles translated or people fed. The problem with these measures is that the most important factors affecting them are outside of the control of the home office. For example, political instability inÂ a country can really slow down Bible translation and there is not much that can be done to change this from an office in the south of England.

Alternatively, you could find a way to assess the health and wellbeing of the workers on the field; the home office can have a huge impact on this and it is extremely important. However, there are a few problems with measuring this one, too. Firstly, what - exactly - would you measure? and secondly, what is the point of having a lot of healthy workers who all feel great if they are not achievingÂ anything? Not only that but, as with measuring effectiveness, an awful lot of the things which impact worker wellbeing are way beyond the home office's control.

While agencies generally attempt to monitor things like these, the easiest thing to do is to measure the impact that the agency has in the home country. This can be done by looking at the number of meetings held, the number of supporters on the mailing list, the value of donations and the flow of recruits. These are simple things which can be easily measured, graphed and tracked over time. In fact, charities are required to follow some of these details by the government.

Measuring recruitment and donations is attractive for a number of reasons. It is relatively easy; most agencies can dig out these figures without too much hassle. These figures give an instant snapshot of the way in which the agency is growing or not, as the case may be. They are also pretty simple, it doesn't take a lot of interpretation to work out whether income is increasing, holding steady or declining. For busy people, easy to interpret statistics are innately attractive.

However, I am increasingly convinced that metrics such as these are of limited use in assessing the health or effectiveness of a mission agency. Let me give a couple of reasons.

Firstly, the situation we are living in is a complex one and agencies face a variety of challenges. Yesterday, I looked at the issue of recruitment. In our current climate, I don't think that agency recruitment numbers tell us very much. It might look as though the figures are simple and don't require much interpretation (see above), but I'd argue that this is far from the case.

Secondly, there is an old adage that we measure what we value and we value what we measure. When agencies focus on recruitment and donations they are implicitly making the statement that these things are important, which, in turn, says that mission is essentially about the flow of resources from the UK (or the West) to the rest of the world. The thing is, mission is now much more complex than this, sending people and money from the UK is only a part of a polyvalent whole. Also, when we focus on inputs (people and money) we tend to slip into the mentality that growth (more

donations, more recruits) is intrinsically a good thing. Now, there may be a case to be made for agencies growing, but at this point in history, I wouldn't assume that this is always a given, nor that it is always possible.

The thing is, when we concentrate on measuring deliverables such as finance and recruitment, we can ignore the elephant in the room - what exactly should the agency be doing in this day and age? Could a smaller and more focussed organisation be what is needed? Are we simply trying to maintain the status quo without actually asking the hard questions? My friend Peter tweeted this response to my blog post yesterday, which neatly sums up everything I've tried to say in far more words...

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