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## **Compass:** **Back to Basics: Measurement Matters**

*By Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham*

“If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it”

– David Norton (of the *Balanced Scorecard*)

April 23 was Earth Day. An intriguing column in that day’s *San Francisco Chronicle* (“[Net tool tracks carbon footprint by ZIP code](#)”) got us thinking once more about the critical importance of what and how we measure the things we’re trying to manage—and transform.

The article described a new web application developed by Cisco Systems that lets individual San Francisco residents type in their ZIP code and see information about things like carbon footprint, recycling rates, trash collection, hybrid car ownership, and other critical environmental factors that contribute to energy consumption (the application is currently available only in San Francisco—[at this link](#)—but it’s scheduled for a much wider rollout in the near future—see also [our April 23 blog post](#) about the same subject).

What’s the big deal about measuring the carbon footprint of your neighborhood? Clearly, the City and the web developers want to focus people’s attention on things they could do to reduce their own—and thus their neighborhood’s—CO<sub>2</sub> output. The logic is obvious: if you realize that you’re not doing all you can, or less than other nearby areas, there’s both an incentive and a knowledge base for making constructive change.

In spite of how important this kind of tool is to addressing global climate change, we think there’s actually a much bigger lesson here. It’s captured by Dave Norton’s basic faith in the foundational nature of measurement.

After all, to measure something is to learn about it—to know what’s going on. In our everyday life measurement is so intertwined with awareness of the world around us that we often don’t think twice about it. Yet, if we can’t, or don’t, measure something, we are essentially ignorant about it’s existence (for example, before Ben Franklin figured out how to measure the effect of a bolt of lightning, the world didn’t really know electricity even existed).

Think about it: until the last several years few of us even knew that buildings spew carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, or had any clue about how much water we “consume” every day (of course we don’t actually consume water in the sense of destroying it—but we certainly do things to it that require recycling and purification). Thanks to the [Green Building Council](#), and to organizations like the [International Water Management Institute](#), we’re now a heck of a lot more knowledgeable about those previously “unknown” realities.

But this idea isn't just about environmental factors like air, water, and electricity. It applies to everything—literally *everything*—we do and know.

In fact, the most basic theories for describing the process of human learning (we're going back to our grad school days for this part) depend on observation and data as the basic source of knowledge. We're thinking of John Dewey; his concept of [an experiential learning cycle](#) involves four basic stages that repeat themselves over and over again:

1. Acting, or Experiencing (doing something);
2. Observing, or Reflecting (understanding the impact of our actions);
3. Concluding, or Interpreting (thinking through what's just happened); and
4. Planning (figuring out what to do next).

Certainly it goes without saying (but we'll say it anyway) that effective learning essentially involves paying attention to (observing/reflecting) the most important factors in that experience, and then refining our theories about how things work and what causes what.

In fact, this idea links directly back to our [feature article](#); as we develop new ideas and figure out how to measure something for the first time, we quite literally become aware of things we've never perceived before. That's how the process of transformation gets started; we hit that re-set button and start reinventing the world we experience.

Because what you pay attention to, or “see,” determines what you learn. To shift metaphors a bit, the “lens” you use dramatically affects not only what you “see” but what you think, and what you do in the future.

Just tell ten people to “watch” something, or ask them what happened in the meeting they just came out of, and chances are you'll get ten different answers—because they were each using their own personal lens to frame their individual experience, whether they realized it or not. Indeed, one of the core concepts of being part of a meaningful group (dare we say “community”?) is having a shared view of how the world works—of experiencing things similarly.

We've often spoken in the past about the importance and value of what we like to call “data-based management.” When executives (or anyone, for that matter) make decisions that aren't based on some kind of objective reality, watch out. Odds are they won't be making intelligent choices.

We've told this story before: we met for several hours with a group of executives at a pharmaceutical company who told us “Our people all work in their offices or conference rooms; no one needs mobile devices.” We left that conversation, walked out of the building through the company cafeteria and observed four different team meetings going on simultaneously, with three or four laptops and a cell phone or two in use within each group. Tuning in to reality might have helped those executives think through a mobility strategy just a bit more thoroughly.

What you see depends not just on what you look at, but how you filter it. So your “theory” of how workplace design affects employee behavior and business performance will have a direct impact on which elements of that design you pay attention to. Similarly, your

beliefs about people will have a massive impact on your willingness to trust employees to work independently or remotely.

Perhaps more to the point, the way you measure employee performance (or whether you measure it at all) will ultimately determine whether your organization embraces new ways of working (e.g., flexible work, remote work, mobile work) or denies the realities of the way most people are already working.

Not to end on too deep a philosophical point, but please think about this story (which Jim first heard way back in graduate school in a social psychology course):

Three baseball umpires were talking about how they call the balls, strikes, and outs in a game. The first said, "I call them as they are." The second commented, "I call them as I see them." And the third said, "They're nothing until I call them."

Bottom line: we actively create the realities that we experience, react to, and learn from. How do *you* measure workplace and workforce performance? It matters.

[Please send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you. This article is also available online [at this link](#).

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