



Finding balance in a numbers-obsessed world

Significant statistics and identified behaviors provide a complete picture of best practices

By Steve Harvill

As part of a trio of consultants charged with studying the key behavioral traits of a client's top managers, I spent a significant amount of time paring down unnecessary information to make the information relevant and relatable.

My project resulted in a three-page, graphic presentation on management, one of the three topics addressed. The other topics, presented by my counterparts, involved sales and support staff.

After completing my presentation to the client, I sat in confused amazement as the next report unveiled countless Excel spreadsheets, each with column after column of color-coded information. The group had managed to contain statistic after statistic, all in a nine-point font.

Despite my rapt attention, I had no idea what the key results were. What was important? I recognized that the "passion of statistics" was in full bore. So much data was contained in the report that everyone lost track of what had meaning.

This is a common problem in corporate America, where data and statistics often overshadow bottom-line relevance. Similar to the emperor and his new clothes, hardly anyone asks, "So what?"

Shooting for the green

A good example of passion in statistics is PGA golfer Tiger Woods. Perhaps the most studied athlete in history, Woods has more statistical information than most Fortune 100 companies:

- He has 56 wins in 200 PGA Tour starts.
- He wins 27 percent of the time.
- Since the start of the 2002 season, he is 24 for 89 and has played 350 rounds.
- He beats his playing partners 72 percent of the time.
- He averages 69.2 strokes per round, while his playing partners average 71.8 strokes.

- In 33 tour events when he has shared or held the outright lead after 36 holes, he has won 27 times; after 54 holes tied or in the lead, he is 39 for 42.
- He is 12 for 12 when entering the final round of a major tournament tied or in the lead.

Despite the statistical significance of Woods' career, the numbers don't tell the entire story. It is the way he behaves that defines him; it is a set of beliefs, values and discipline that makes Tiger Woods who he is.

Infatuation with the power of numbers and voluminous amounts of information is a common malady. We crave more data. We need it to support our decisions. We need historical context to map our future. The statistics are a result of a mind-boggling set of metrics. The process of deciding what should be measured is the key to significance.

The same is true for business. It is about a company's people and what they do. Statistics don't make the person; it is the person's behavior that generates statistics.

High-performance results

Fortune magazine recently published a study on high-performance behavior and discovered that belief and behavior dictate outstanding performance. It is a field of subjective items that drives the success of an individual and organization.

The study found that:

- Talent has surprisingly little to do with success.
- Excellence is not a consequence of possessing innate gifts.
- There is no evidence of high-level performance without experience and practice.
- Most performers learn quickly at the beginning, then enter a slower level of learning; most stop learning completely as time goes on.
- Great achievers are all about deliberate practice; these are specific activities

intended to improve performance.

- Elite performers practice some element every day.
- It's not about getting it done; it's about getting it done better.
- The most critical aspect of performance is how one thinks.

Organizations are the same way. They are the collective success of their employees' individual beliefs, practices and behaviors.

Balancing metrics

Every organization must have a firm foundation in the reality of its statistics. It needs simple, powerful metrics that address the core of performance. An unbalanced approach — a myopic view of success based on statistics alone — will not lead to the levels of excellence desired in corporate America. Significant numbers must be teamed with an understanding of behavioral patterns.

It is a simple process of balancing two important elements:

- It is crucial to develop relevant metrics that create the statistics needed to measure success. The problem lies in the temptation to measure everything. It takes great discipline and skill to simplify enough to deliver relevance.
- Identify the behaviors of top performers. Discover what they do that directly relates to their success. Through this process, it is easier to identify the behaviors and attitudes that create impact. Impact points often are unique to each individual, but some will be repeatable and can be replicated throughout the company.

To find adequate balance, determine a method to simplify your company's metrics, then determine what employees are doing that drives their success. 

Steve Harvill is principal of Creative Ventures. He can be reached at steveharvill@businessleader.com or by visiting www.creativeventures.com.