

## **Measuring Progress**

*We didn't feel like we were being tested when we were in kindergarten. We didn't consider them "real tests" as we would later in grade school when we had rigorous examinations in math, social studies, and spelling. The tests we had in kindergarten were subtler. But, no doubt about it, every day we were being tested. Miss Waters was going through a continual evaluation of our abilities and measuring our progress in a wide range of areas.*

*Our ability to learn was being assessed. Our progress in building good work habits and group participation was being evaluated. Our self-control and discipline were being monitored. Our ability to pay attention was being watched. We were building some basic skills as a foundation upon which other skills would be developed.*

*I remember Miss Waters showing us flash cards with the letters of the alphabet. There was one letter on each card in bold, block font style with upper case on one side and lower case on the opposite side. We started learning the lower case letters. We would all "speak" each letter, as Miss Waters would flash them to us. Sometimes it was easy. Other times, we had to think about which letter she was showing us. She would go faster and faster each day. I had to really think whether she was showing us a lower case "b" or "d". I always yelled "O" when she showed us "Q." I was not the only one calling out the wrong letters. Over time it became easy. We weren't testing ourselves against the ability to read, we were testing ourselves against a smaller, foundational skill.*

*There were many reasons we were closely observed. (Other than the fact that half of us were boys!) She was continually asking herself, "What additional help was*

*needed right now?” and “On which areas should his parents concentrate?” and “Can he be successful in first grade?” and “What will it take for him to be successful in life?”*

*These evaluations were necessary for our short-term success. Our short-term success was essential for long-term success.*

The testing that takes place in kindergarten is different from other types of testing. It tested our readiness from a social standpoint to move on to more detailed and demanding types of work. Both our ability to concentrate and to absorb was assessed. Our mental, emotional, and social abilities were determined and a certain criteria had to be met before we were ready to move on. Only when we are ready should we move up to greater levels of work.

By our nature, we seem to want to move on to the “real work” in eBusiness. In the daily pressures to succeed, we press for the finish line without really doing all the tasks. Sometimes we get lucky and “skate” through a B2B implementation. When we do so, we are unable to duplicate our success. We falter the next time but are not sure why.

There are a few things that we willingly tend to give up in our quest: documentation and testing. Yet they play a key role in determining our likelihood for sustaining our programs.

**Measure progress in order to adjust plans.** We didn’t receive the traditional “letter grades” in kindergarten: A, B, and C. Our grades were V, S, and N: Very Good Progress, Satisfactory, or Needs More Time. The grades and measures were appropriate to what we were expected to accomplish in the short-term.

Initially we were assessed against our ability to recognize letters. Once we had mastered that skill we would be assessed against our ability to identify sounds. With the previous skill mastered, the earlier measure was no longer necessary or advantageous. Progress against the next skill was now what was important. A new measure was needed.

If we faltered to sufficiently develop one of the “building block” skills, the teacher would adjust. We may have taken longer and concentrated more effort on the skill. Our parents would have been called on to help and given aids and instruction. The plans were based on need-- personal where needed and broad where appropriate.

The same thought should apply to our B2B projects.

**Only measure if you are willing to take corrective measure.** You need to assess real progress, not just “gate deliverables” or other artificial events. There is nothing worse than measuring the wrong thing or measuring for the wrong reason. This can demoralize a team and give them the wrong signal concerning what is important.

You should only set goals that you control. To be handed a goal by your boss is normal. To be handed a goal which seems unachievable is disheartening. But to be handed a goal where we cannot control or influence the outcome is ridiculous.

You have to think of our measures as you would a compass. You use a compass to make sure you are on the right path. When we have veered from the right path, we quickly know what to do about it.

You need to measure early and often. Monthly measures are generally best. But only measure if you are going to do something different if the measure “goes south.” If you are going to sit on “pins and needles” just hoping things will turn around, the measures haven’t done anything for you.

You will need to be able to “morph” the measure over time. Use the measure to know when you are ready for the next level. Move to the new goal and to a new measure. Progress is made in doing the two in tandem and not confusing which is which.

**Start with knowing what you are ultimately going to measure.** It is usually easier to think of the long-term goal, instead of the interim goals. That doesn’t mean it is always easy to identify everything that you want to achieve.

Your goal may be 75% of your order entry transactions handled electronically. Sounds fair and reasonable. However, the goal might be better if it were “75% of your order entry transactions handled electronically while customer satisfaction is improved by 50%.” The first goal might give you one time cost savings, but the combined goal gives you a sustainable solution that can be used elsewhere.

Your long-term goal needs to be framed in your customers’ view of the world. Once you are happy with that goal, confirm it with a “Voice of Customer” (VoC) assessment. Your customer will tell you how they feel about the goals you propose. Next, work your way backward to establish interim and monthly goals. Just like with the

reading “building blocks,” one goal should lead to the next goal. One measure should lead to the next measure.

By doing this you set realistic goals, but also ones that can be exceeded. You know what exceeding the goal means. For example, if I set a goal to read one book this week and one book next week, I know how to exceed the first week’s goal. I can begin to read the second book. I can get a “jumpstart” on the next week’s goal. If I read the first book twice, I have done a great deal of additional work, but I haven’t exceeded the goal.

Once you have established the goals, and know what it means to exceed the goals, you can go out and try to exceed them.

Measure-- even when it is hard. Sometimes it is nearly impossible or too expensive to set up quantitative measures. Instead, you may be able to use qualitative measures to get another view of the situation. People will generally have a good sense of whether progress is being made or not and frequently can come up with some alternate measure.

**Test and measure to know you have succeeded.** In kindergarten, reading was not required. But readiness to read was a key focus. Skills were being developed and evaluated in auditory and visual discrimination. If our measure had been on reading in kindergarten, we would have all failed. The step-by-step progress needed to be measured and monitored.

Once I was on a tirade about an inappropriate measure that a business unit was so proudly proclaiming. They were so excited that they were moving the “needle,” but failing to see that their measure was empty and meaningless in moving them along to achieving the long-term goal. I wrote a rhetorical question, “If they don’t know where they are going, how are they going to get there?”

My colleague, Vince Bianchi, astutely summed it up in a few words, “Isn’t that what Alice said?” It brought to mind a great truth from the conversation in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

*"In this age, which believes that there is a short cut to everything, the greatest lesson to be learned is that the most difficult way is, in the long run, the easiest." -Henry Miller*



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