

Pursuing Excellence

The power of metrics in performance improvement

IT'S A BIT ironic that, despite being in a position where my performance was judged entirely on metrics, I ignored them. In fact, I knew I was underperforming, but being so immature, I just wasn't eager to receive the proverbial slap in the face and see the reports that aggregated my performance-based statistics.

I'm not talking about preparing for a mid-year review or my years in quality management and process improvement. Rather, I'm referring to my collegiate football career as a punter. This is the story of my journey from lackadaisical and passive performance to data-driven dominance.

Metrics matter

For three seasons, I struggled mightily in my role, and my inattention to statistics indicated I was not earnestly pursuing greatness. What's worse, my performance metrics were on countless web-

sites, such as ESPN and CBS Sports, for anyone in the world to see. This kind of transparency was absolutely frightening, and rather than accepting it and learning from it, I continued to neglect it.

That all changed between my junior and senior-year seasons. After a series of conversations with my coaches, I was inspired to take ownership of my performance.

First, I identified an extensive list of more than 20 metrics from which I could learn about my performance—successes and failures. After reviewing three years of performance data, it was difficult to accept the fact that the failures seriously outnumbered the successes to date, but this acceptance was a critical step in my personal journey to the elite level.

Second, I reviewed the statistics for each top performer in my conference. Specifically, I sorted through the 20-plus metrics and prioritized the five key measurements to address based on the cor-

relation between league-leading statistics and post-season accolades (the true performance indicators). Needless to say, it became clear through gap analysis that I underperformed in each key category, as shown in Table 1.

Third, after I identified the five key metrics on which I needed to focus—the “critical few”—I spent weeks studying the best practitioners and adopting certain techniques into my own repertoire to specifically improve my punting timing, distance and location.

Finally, with an effective approach in place, I was able to refine my game and improve my on-field performance. The shift from inattentive to passionate translated to sustained dominance and completed my own pursuit of collegiate athletic excellence: I was the NCAA statistical leader in net punting and was named all-conference and all-American. I was then fortunate enough to earn the opportunity to try out in two professional leagues: the National Football League and the United Football League.

In short, focusing on the critical few metrics enabled performance management—and excitement due to accomplishment—unlike anything I had experienced before, and I owe it entirely to my coaches who instilled a passion for taking ownership and to the numbers that showed me the way.

Winning blueprint

How is this relevant to us, as quality managers? As a lean Six Sigma practitioner focused on business strategy and transformation, I can say the applicability is truly one-to-one: If managers ignore objective, fact-based metrics, then they



Gap analysis of punting metrics / TABLE 1

Metric	Description	Best practice (2007 Ivy League)	Freshman through junior years season average	Senior year season average
Handling time	The total time the punter takes to catch the snap and kick the ball.	< 1.5 seconds	~ 1.8 seconds (which led to four blocked punts)	< 1.4 seconds (no blocked punts)
Hang time	The total time the ball spends in the air as it travels downfield from the punter before it makes contact with the ground or the punt returner catches the ball.	0.9-1.1 seconds per 10 yards traveled (this varies due to situational punting)	~ 0.7 seconds per 10 yards traveled	~ 0.9 seconds per 10 yards traveled
Distance	The total yards the punt covers from the line of scrimmage to where the ball hits the ground or the punt returner catches the ball.	41 yards	35 yards	41 yards
Net punt distance	The total distance (above) minus the yards gained by the punt returner on his advancement of the ball.	35 yards	~ 30 yards	37 yards (national leader)
Location	The percentage of punts landing inside the opponent's 20-yard line, which statistically shows an increased difficulty for the opponent to score.	30%	26.5%	34.5%

Sources: The Ivy League, "2007 Ivy League Football," www.ivyleaguesports.com/sports/fball/2007-08/files/stats/confstat.htm and game footage.

cannot make informed decisions to help their organization improve in its pursuit of excellence.

Too often, we see leaders who give performance ratings, bonuses and promotions based on whether Sally was nice or Jimmy came in on weekends, rather than on the items that matter most and tie directly to corporate goals.

So, how can we target elite status in our own lives and professions? To enhance performance and process management, I suggest the four-step approach I used in my athletic journey to elite and still leverage today: the WINS formula.

1. Where am I or where are we now?

Data-driven identification of current-state areas of under and over-performance. Gather all baseline metrics.

2. Internal vs. external assessment.

Conduct benchmarking and gap analysis. Identify critical few measurements for process and performance moving forward.

3. Normalize. Leverage best practices and make them relevant.

4. Sustained dominance. Manage effectively using the few vital and transparent metrics.

Apply this winning blueprint fervently to any aspect of life—personal or professional—and the benefits will undoubtedly be reaped. **QP**



BRIAN SCULLIN is assistant vice president of global transformation at a financial services organization in New York. He has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH, and is currently completing his master's degree at the London School of Economics. Scullin is a member of ASQ and a Villanova University-certified Six Sigma Green Belt.

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