



Stanford eCorner

Measuring the Wrong Thing

Steven McCormick, *Moore Foundation*

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If a nonprofit puts the emphasis on what is solely measurable, it can inadvertently cause the organization to do things that are not part of their mission, says Steven McCormick, president of the Moore Foundation. Here McCormick shares a sobering example of when an institution measures by the wrong metric.



Transcript

Non-profits are not for profits. It is very hard to measure results in a quantitative way in a not for profit organization. And as the adage goes, what you measure gets managed. If you put emphasis on things that are measurable, you actually may drive organizations to do things that aren't really adding up to the prize. Someone shared with me a little while ago, a guy named Mario Molina who is a very successful investor, venture capitalist, who has got deeply involved in the Art and Science practice of philanthropy. And has advocated for outcome based philanthropy, said you need to be careful about it, because as we saw in Vietnam, the measure was body count. You can count the number of bodies that were the result of a battle and what happened? We lost in Vietnam. We drove all of the field leadership to think in terms of how many bodies could we get in that battle. And we're adding up bodies at the time we were not - this country was not making progress in the political environment, in the economic environment, in the social environment and in Vietnam. And then so I had no hope of winning in Vietnam.

And the north Vietnamese were willing to keep putting bodies into the body count. Good example, but a sobering example of measuring the wrong thing. So in a not for profit setting, measuring success will require much more nuance, much more subtle ways of accessing progress, more like gathering evidence for a legal case than it is sort of counting something.