

# Using Measurement Well

Richard Higginson interviews Paul Valler about his recent Grove Booklet



*Paul Valler*

Richard caught up with Paul at the Faith in Business conference in Cambridge.

**Paul, can you begin by telling us a bit about yourself, who you are and what you've done in life?**

I'm married to Helen, with children and grandchildren. I've had a career largely in industry - for 20 years I was with Hewlett Packard, which appropriately described itself as a computer and measurement company. In parallel for over 25 years I served on church leadership teams and currently work with LICC as one of their Associate speakers. I speak on faith in the workplace, work-life integration, leadership and other related topics.

**You've recently written a new Grove Booklet called *Using Measurement Well*. What led you to look at this subject and what do you hope to achieve by writing this?**

As someone who's been immersed in the measurement culture all my working life, I want to offer a framework that encourages a culture of human flourishing. By this I don't mean a balanced scorecard – rather an integrated framework that is theologically based and helps us on the issues of what to measure, how to measure and how measures affect culture.

**Why do you think leaders are sometimes wary of measurement?**

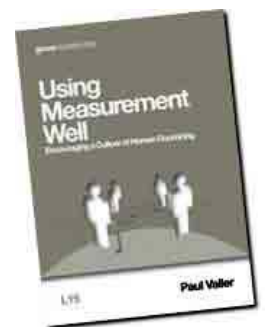
Church leaders particularly are often understandably wary of measurement

because they think it will import the world's obsession with performance into the church. Another concern is that people change when they know they're being measured, and not always in a good way. Sometimes people feel devalued by measures. There are also some theological objections. Some see measuring performance as unbiblical, because God is infinite and his attributes cannot be measured, the unseen is more important than the seen and there is an unknownness about what the Spirit does.

But you find wariness outside the church too. I don't know if you've heard of Goodhart's Law: Charles Goodhart was an economic advisor to the Bank of England, who stated that wherever a measure becomes a target it ceases to be useful as a measure, because of the distorting effect a target has on people's behaviour. So I would say there is a general scepticism about measuring performance.

**You mention the Bible. It's interesting in the Bible there are quite a lot of numbers cited – there's even a book called *Numbers* - and sometimes numbering and measuring is seen in a positive and sometimes a negative light. Can you make any sense of this?**

Yes. Let me outline a couple of paradoxes. In *Numbers*, God commands a census of the Israelites twice, but when David tries the same thing he sins and brings a plague on the people. Another paradox: Jesus tells a story about a king waging war with 10,000 men who is opposed by another



▶▶ king with an army of 20,000, and says he should ask for peace, whereas Gideon, taking on the innumerable numbers of the Midianite army, is told by God to reduce the size of his army to 300 because he has too many!

### **Is the Bible being contradictory?**

The way I see it is that these are paradoxes that are useful for learning about motives. David had pride in numbers, whereas Gideon had a fear of being outnumbered. In both those cases, God had to humble men and make them depend on him. Perhaps one lesson is that we should not be emotionally controlled by numbers.

**What about the book of Acts? There are quite a few numbers there; we're told about the numbers of believers being added to the Christian body. Luke seems to be interested in the empirical growth of the church.**

Yes, he tells us of 3000 being added, and more later. There seems to be a reason why the Holy Spirit wants numbers recorded sometimes. I think it's largely for learning. The parables of Jesus have many measures embedded in them which help learning.

### **The parable of the sower, for instance?**

The parable of the sower is particularly interesting with its mention of thirty-fold, sixty-fold or one hundred-fold - the hundred-fold (not ninety) being a nonlinear measure. Perhaps that indicates a particular blessing from God, because it correlates to a phrase in the Old Testament where Isaac sowed crops and in the same year reaped a hundred-fold because the Lord was with him. Measures here are helping to communicate truth.

### **What is the heart of the message in your book and what underpins it?**

The heart of my book is that human flourishing should really be the reason for

measurement. This is the core of the theological foundation of what I've written. What we measure should strengthen our purpose, how we measure should encourage our relationships and the way we measure should promote a culture of grace in the organisation.

### **Can you measure qualitatively as well as quantitatively?**

Every numerical measure is designed and interpreted by people. This explains why dialogue is really important when it comes to designing and interpreting measures. In some ways the quality of the dialogue is more important than even the quality of the measures, because it is often through discussion that we develop a deeper understanding. Results may be scientifically achieved, but the perception of them depends on people.

So there can be no completely objective measure. A qualitative measure may be equally valuable in some situations.

**In relation to that, is it significant that Jesus told his disciples to make disciples not converts? To measure church growth just in terms of numbers of converts can be misleading. What we should really be interested in are faithful and fruitful disciples.**

Yes. Within the great commission are two assessment criteria – baptising people and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. So there is a clear and visible measure of who identifies with Christ and then a second criterion of obedience - a more subjective measure of discipleship.

### **Very interesting. Have you seen many good examples of measurement being used well?**

A good one would be the annual report of Christians Against Poverty. Last year, 26,000 people engaged with CAP in getting out of debt or becoming debt-free; ▶▶

- ▶▶ of the latter 96% who have worked with CAP have stayed debt-free. This shows measures which are well aligned with their purpose.

Another example comes from the NHS. I've noticed they are starting to use what I would call a 'proxy measure' for patient wellbeing, which is difficult to measure. They now ask the question: 'How likely would you be to recommend this facility to your family and friends?' By assessing your confidence for your nearest and dearest they are identifying a proxy measure that closely tracks the wellbeing of an individual patient.

**Any good examples from the business world? I hope so.**

The energy company Ecotricity has committed to spending a certain proportion of revenue on creating a new renewable energy infrastructure. This is a measure being used for human flourishing. Ecotricity charges slightly more than other suppliers, but they have attracted customers for an inspirational purpose and are now powering something like 100,000 homes.

**What would you say to people who are working inside a performance culture about how best to operate? Can you break this down into a few practical guidelines?**

First, your identity is not dependent on your ability to perform. For the Christian it is based on relationship with God as a child of God. The most manipulative lie in a performance culture is that your identity depends on what you can do. Have a secure basis of your personal identity; don't let numbers undermine your self-worth.

Second, talk about the design and interpretation of measures. How you do that may depend on your seniority and length of service; it needs to be done with tact and wisdom. Opening up a dialogue is helpful; it broadens perspective and enables people to dig into what reality is.

Third, people need to demonstrate grace, both to themselves and others. It is possible to forgive failure not simply punish it.

Fourth, a measurement culture tends to encourage people towards continuous intensity in order to improve results. Continuous intensity is not good for people, because we are designed to live in rhythms; so we need to protect the boundaries of our working patterns.

Finally people in a performance culture need to empower others rather than be constantly trying to control them. Empowerment taps into intrinsic motivations rather than imposing extrinsic motivations. So, for example, it is fascinating to look at the difference between the original online encyclopaedia Encarta, launched by Microsoft, and Wikipedia. Ten years ago no economist would have predicted that thousands of people would have worked on Wikipedia for nothing to create a knowledge database. Wikipedia has tapped into people's latent energy and genius. Empowerment is really important.

**Strangely enough I used Wikipedia in preparation for this conference. It was my first port of call (though not my only port of call!) in giving me information about the histories of lots of companies that I researched.**

**Paul, clearly this is something you've thought deeply about and feel passionately about. Are you doing a lot of speaking on this topic?**

I have done some talks to business audiences, and recently a seminar at LICC and I'm hoping for more opportunities to share this material.

**Thanks very much. I hope publishing this interview will raise the profile of this important topic. ■**