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The Metric That Looked Great on the Dashboard.

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And hid the problem until it was expensive.

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The metric that looked great on the dashboard — and hid the problem until it was expensive.

An operations leader I worked with had a dashboard any executive would be proud of. On-time delivery: 98%. Overall Equipment Effectiveness trending up. Production output at record highs. Every number on the monthly scorecard was green. The board was satisfied, the quarterly review was smooth, and leadership had every reason to believe the operation was healthy.

Then the complaints started. Not many at first — a slow trickle of field issues that did not show up anywhere on the dashboard until they had already become a CAPA, a customer escalation, and eventually a costly containment action. The metrics had been telling a story of success right up until the moment the real story arrived. The dashboard was not wrong. It was measuring the wrong things.

> *"Relying on vanity metrics is like a doctor trying to diagnose a patient by only looking at their weight. It tells you nothing about blood pressure, cholesterol, or underlying health."*

The distinction that matters here is the one between a vanity metric and a true process KPI. A vanity metric makes you feel good but does not tell you how to improve. A process KPI is a diagnostic tool — it gives you a clear, actionable insight into the health of a specific workflow. The trap is that vanity metrics are almost always the easier ones to measure, the easier ones to report, and the easier ones to celebrate. So they dominate the dashboard, while the metrics that would have surfaced the real problem never make it onto the scorecard at all.

Sources: ECONS, "Process KPIs vs. Vanity Metrics" (Jan. 2026); Tableau, "Vanity Metrics" research

Why regulated operations are especially vulnerable

In MedTech and regulated manufacturing, the dashboard problem has a specific and dangerous shape: most operational scorecards are dominated by lagging indicators. A lagging indicator reports what already happened — last month's scrap rate, the quarter's complaint count, this shift's output. These metrics are reliable and hard to argue with, which is exactly why they fill up executive reports. But by the time a lagging indicator moves, the event it measures is already in the past. You are reading the scoreboard after the play is over.

The research on this is direct. A well-designed KPI system carries roughly 60 to 70% leading indicators at the operational level — the metrics operations can actually influence in time — and 30 to 40% lagging indicators to confirm the outcomes. Most plants invert this ratio, reporting 80% or more lagging indicators because they are easier to measure. The result is a KPI system that is accurate but not actionable: everyone knows what went wrong yesterday, but no one can change what will go wrong tomorrow.

Sources: Symestic, "Production Metrics" (Apr. 2026); Fabrico, "Leading vs. Lagging Indicators" (2026)

THE MEASUREMENT SIGNAL

> *Gartner found that 49% of manufacturers lack confidence in their manufacturing strategy to deliver on business outcomes over the next three years. Over-reliance on lagging metrics is a central reason why: a scorecard that only confirms past results cannot steer future ones. One industry expert titled his 2025 analysis of the most celebrated metric in manufacturing simply: "OEE: One Number, Many Lies."*

Sources: Gartner via Advanced Technology Services (Apr. 2026); Symestic (2025)

The three questions I use to test a dashboard

When I review an operational scorecard with a leadership team, I am not looking at whether the numbers are good. I am looking at whether the numbers are honest — whether they would actually surface a problem before it becomes expensive. Three questions do most of the work:

First: Can this metric be gamed without improving the underlying reality? On-time delivery can be hit by shipping incomplete or borderline product. Output can be maximized while first-pass yield quietly erodes. If a metric can go green while the real process gets worse, it is a vanity metric wearing a KPI's clothing.

Second: Does this metric predict, or only confirm? If every number on your dashboard tells you what already happened, you have a reporting system, not a management system. The metrics that matter most — supplier quality rate, right-first-time, near-miss and deviation trends — are the ones that give you time to act before the lagging indicator moves.

Third: If this metric were the only thing I could see, what would it hide? Every metric has a blind spot. A record production month can hide a rising cost of quality. A strong OEE number can hide a maintenance backlog building toward a failure. The discipline is not to add more metrics — one of the most underrated skills in operations is knowing when to stop adding them — but to know precisely what each number on the board is not telling you.

Sources: Intelycx, “Quality Metrics in Manufacturing” (May 2026); Symestic (2026)

The design question underneath the dashboard

A dashboard is not a neutral mirror of an operation. It is a design choice — a set of decisions about what leadership will see, what it will celebrate, and what it will structurally ignore. When the metrics that are easy to report crowd out the metrics that would surface real risk, the organization has not made a measurement error. It has made a design error. And it will keep making it, quarter after quarter, until the day the hidden problem becomes an expensive one.

The leader I described was not careless. The dashboard was well-built, well-maintained, and well-reviewed — for a set of questions that turned out to be the wrong ones. The leadership question underneath every scorecard is the same one that sits underneath every operational risk: Are we measuring what makes us look good, or what keeps us safe? Those are not always the same numbers. And knowing the difference — by design — is what separates a dashboard that reassures from one that actually protects.

One question to carry this week:

Look at the greenest metric on your dashboard this month. If it stayed green while your operation quietly deteriorated — would you know? Or would you find out the way most organizations do: when it becomes expensive?

A dashboard that only tells you what already happened is a report. A dashboard that tells you what is about to happen is a design decision.

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