The Tyranny of Metrics

Description

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The Tyranny of Metrics, by Jerry Z Muller, Princeton University Press, RRPÂ£19.95/ $24.95, 240 pages

See Tim Harfordâ??s review of this book in the Financial Times, 24, January 2018

Some quotes: Muller shows that metrics are often used as a substitute for relevant experience, by managers with generic rather than specific expertise. Muller does not claim that metrics are always useless, but that we expect too much from them as a tool of management. â?¦.

The Tyranny of Metrics does us a service in briskly pulling together parallel arguments from economics, management science, philosophy and psychology along with examples from education, policing, medicine, business and the military.

In an excellent final chapter, Muller summarises his argument thus: â??measurement is not an alternative to judgement: measurement demands judgement: judgement about whether to measure, what to measure, how to evaluate the significance of whatâ??s been measured, whether rewards and penalties will be attached to the results, and to whom to make the measurements availableâ?•.

The book does not engage seriously enough with the possibility that the advantages of metric-driven accountability might outweigh the undoubted downsides. Tellingly, Muller complains of a university ratings metric that rewards high graduation rates, access for disadvantaged students, and low costs. He says these requirements are â??mutually exclusiveâ?•, but they are not. They are in tension with each other,

Nor does this book reckon with evidence that mechanical statistical predictions often beat the subjective judgment of experts.

â?¦and perhaps most curiously, there is no discussion of computers, cheap sensors, or big data. In this respect, at least, the book could have been written in the 1980s.

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