

The Map That Ate the Territory

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Metrics dashboards are supposed to represent an organisation’s work. This essay argues that past a certain size, the dashboard stops representing the work and starts *replacing* it as the object of attention — and that the failure mode is structural, not a matter of picking better metrics.

Every growing organisation eventually builds a dashboard: a single screen distilling the state of the business into a handful of numbers a leader can absorb in ten seconds.¹ The trouble begins once the dashboard stops being a *window* onto the work and becomes the thing people manage *to*.

The compression is lossy by construction

A dashboard number is, definitionally, a lossy compression of something richer. “Support tickets resolved per day” compresses away whether the resolution actually helped the customer. “Commits per engineer per week” compresses away whether any given commit made the codebase better or worse. This is not a flaw that better metric design can fix — it is what a metric *is*: a projection from a high-dimensional reality onto one number, and every projection discards information along whichever dimensions it does not capture.²

Optimisation pressure finds the seam

The lossiness would be harmless if nobody optimised against the compressed number specifically. But once a team’s performance is *evaluated* on “tickets resolved per day”, the fastest way to raise that number is not necessarily to help customers faster — it is to find whatever behaviour raises the count with the least effort, which is exactly the behaviour the compression was blind to in the first place. The dashboard did not merely fail to capture the seam between the metric and the goal; its existence as a target actively widens that seam, because now there is a reason to search for it.

Why “add more metrics” does not fix this

The standard response to a gamed metric is to add a second metric that catches the gaming — customer satisfaction alongside ticket count, code review approval alongside commit count. This narrows the seam but cannot close it, for the same reason one projection

¹ The instinct is sound. A CEO cannot personally read every support ticket, every commit, every customer call — a dashboard is a necessary compression of information that would otherwise be inaccessible at scale.

² This is the same shape of argument mathematicians make about projections in linear algebra: a projection onto a subspace necessarily loses whatever lay outside that subspace, no matter how well-chosen the subspace is.

Reality	Dashboard
customer helped	ticket closed
code improved	commit merged
user retained	session logged

Figure 1: Each dashboard column discards everything in its row except the one thing it counts.

plus a second projection still is not the full-dimensional reality: two numbers are still two numbers, and an organisation with enough scale to need a dashboard in the first place has a process too high-dimensional for any small fixed set of numbers to fully pin down.³

The map is not obligated to become the territory

None of this is an argument against dashboards. It is an argument against treating the dashboard as a sufficient substitute for looking at the underlying work. The map is useful precisely because it is smaller than the territory; the failure mode is forgetting that a smaller thing was ever a compression at all, and starting to manage the map as though it were the territory itself.

³ This is why the healthiest organisations tend to pair dashboards with judgment — a manager who actually reads a sample of the underlying tickets, not just the count — rather than trying to solve the problem with a bigger dashboard.