

The look-back grid

For a team that has just finished an improvement cycle. Plan on one meeting. Place what you talked about and what you measured, then look at which box is empty.

OUR OUTCOME

For example, third grade reading proficiency on the spring state test, or the share of ninth graders who miss 10 percent or more of school days

1 What you talked about.

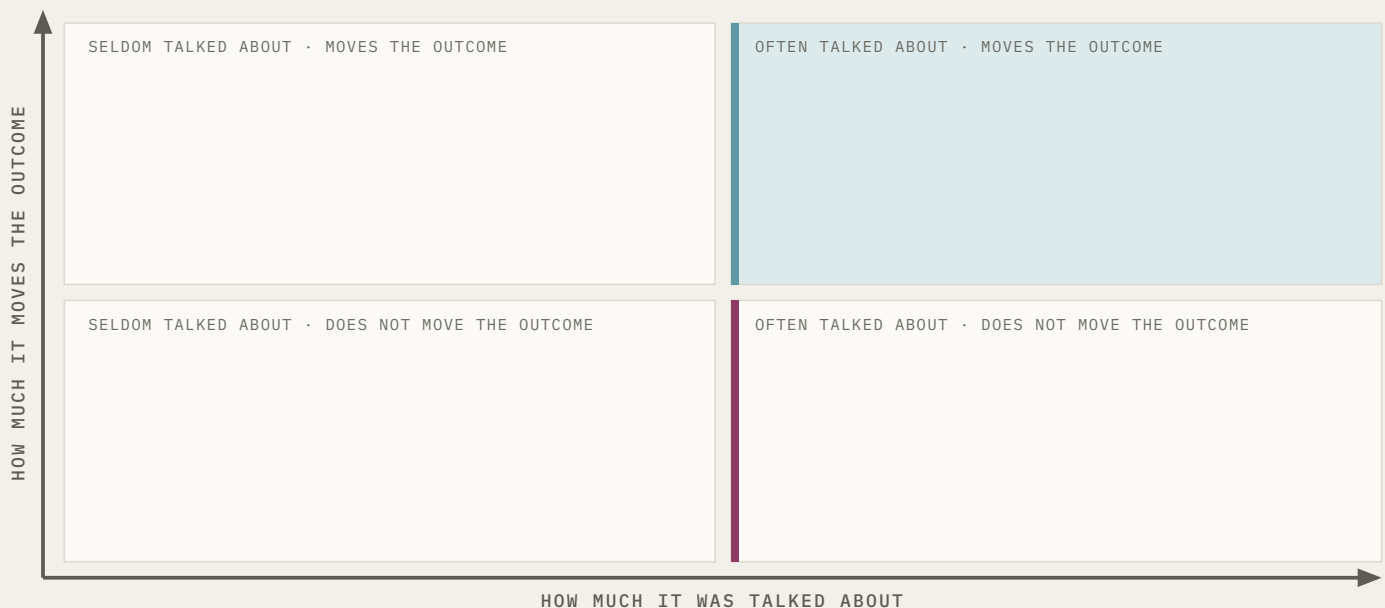
List what came up most in the cycle's meetings, including the reasons things did or did not happen.

2 What you measured.

Write down the measure the team reported.

3 Place them.

Put each item in a box. Expect much of it to end up on the right side.



4 Look at the top right.

Is anything there? If it is empty, that is the finding. Leave it empty.

5 What nobody raised.

In the top left, write what moves the outcome and never came up.

6 Choose what to measure next.

Pick one item from the top left. Name how the team will measure it in the next cycle, and who will own it.

Adapted from Matthew Stagner's piece, [Programs Need Continuous Learning, Not Just Evaluation](#).

If your team is looking back on a cycle, I would love to hear about it.



What the research says

The research behind this grid, which is adapted from Matthew Stagner's piece, *Programs Need Continuous Learning, Not Just Evaluation*. Links to every source are at swerdlowpartners.com/the-look-back-grid.

A structured look back improves what teams do next.

Tannenbaum and Cerasoli's meta-analysis of 46 samples found that debriefs, also called after-action reviews, improved performance by about 25 percent on average over control groups. The effect held for teams and individuals, and the authors point to alignment, facilitation, and structure as what makes a debrief work.

Tannenbaum, S. I., & Cerasoli, C. P. (2013). Do team and individual debriefs enhance performance? A meta-analysis. *Human Factors*, 55(1), 231–245.
doi.org/10.1177/0018720812448394

The problems that come up most may not be the ones that matter most.

Tversky and Kahneman showed that people judge how frequent or likely something is by how easily examples come to mind, which they called the availability heuristic. The grid applies that finding to a cycle's meetings by separating how much something was talked about from how much it moves the outcome.

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1973). Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability. *Cognitive Psychology*, 5(2), 207–232.

A measure can improve while the outcome stays put.

Campbell warned that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decisionmaking, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” The busy quadrant is where that shows up in a cycle, when the team's measure improves and the outcome does not.

Campbell, D. T. (1979). Assessing the impact of planned social change. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 2(1), 67–90.
[doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189\(79\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189(79)90048-X)

See the system that produces the outcome.

Bryk and colleagues list “see the system that produces the current outcomes” and “we cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure” among their six principles of improvement. The grid's last step, choosing one thing to measure next and naming who owns it, follows from both.

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

Whether people raise something depends on the team.

Edmondson found that team psychological safety is associated with learning behavior, and that learning behavior mediates between safety and performance. Step 5 asks the team to name what never came up, which depends on people feeling able to say it.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.

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