

If Your KPIs Describe Work, They Aren't KPIs

I've been given goals described as departmental KPIs that looked more like personal task lists.

- Work to be produced.
- Content to be published.
- Activity to be completed.

At first glance, this kind of structure feels practical. It clarifies expectations. It documents responsibilities. It ensures that work is happening.

But that isn't what KPIs are designed to do.

Organizational KPIs exist to help leadership see signal. They help leadership understand whether the system is moving in the intended direction. They make tradeoffs visible. They inform decisions.

Task lists document effort, which is something entirely different.

When those two things are combined, something subtle happens. Activity becomes easier to track than outcomes. Progress becomes defined by completion instead of quality.

What's missing is orientation.

A list of tasks can tell you whether something was done. It can't tell you whether the system is working. That distinction matters more than most people realize.

When organizational KPIs start absorbing task-level work, leadership visibility quietly narrows. Teams stay busy. Reports stay full. But the information needed for real decisions becomes harder to see.

Once that shift happens, the system stops asking the question KPIs were originally designed to answer:

Is the organization moving in the direction leadership intended?

KPIs exist to help leadership see the system clearly enough to make decisions.

When they start describing work instead of movement, they stop functioning as KPIs.