Leading Inefficiency Indicators

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I was introduced to a ball-peen hammer at arts and crafts camp when I was about seven years old. I made an ashtray by pounding the bejesus out of a sheet of copper. As a metalworking tool, it was pretty neat. But, when I visit factories now, a ball-peen hammer is a leading indicator of a systemic issue. Here’s why:

A while back, as I was touring an engine assembly line, an associate spotted a worker with a bucket of plugs and a ball-peen hammer. He was tapping a plug into each engine as it passed his station. “That’s not a good sign,” my associate said to me, “Let’s walk up the process to see what’s going on.” Sure enough, two stations upstream, an automatic feeder was shut down awaiting maintenance.

Apparently, a sensor mounted on the feeder to detect the presence of plugs in the in-chute had been misaligned and was now causing a material jam — and, of course, still detecting the presence of the material it was jamming. A repair tag on the chute indicated that the repair request was over a month old. But why rush to fix the machine when you’ve got a downstream operator with a ball-peen hammer?

After that, I began watching for ball-peen hammers. They must be very versatile tools because I see them often — and almost always they’re used for rework or a workaround, to straighten alignment or to make things fit.

Here are few more leading indicators. They jump right out at you if look for them:

1. **Quality statement wallpaper.** How many times must a quality statement be posted? Often there are vintages, one from 1999, one from 2006. Once I

visited a company that had even mounted its quality statement in the bathroom stalls: management graffiti. It could be the corporate vision or values or other such profundity. The more of these messages I see from management to employees, the less I see going in the other direction. It never fails.

2. **Unmarked metal shop cabinets.** 78 inches high, 36 inches wide and 18 inches deep, usually gray. Sometimes there's a wall of them. Maybe they even are the wall, intended to block line of sight. The upper shelves are too high to use comfortably, the lower ones too low. The depth encourages overstock. Things get lost and mixed up in the back of the cabinet. And the whole bit is hidden behind steel doors. Who knows what's in them? Maybe they're empty or maybe they're so overstuffed that we dare not open them. They're indestructible — they're born, but they never die; they just accumulate. Leading indicator: Unstable process.
3. **Safety glasses not worn.** Warning signs are everywhere: Safety Glass Area. But, some employees are not wearing them. Leading indicator: More generally, standards are known, but not practiced.
4. **Locked suggestion boxes.** These simply indicate there are very few ideas forthcoming from employees, at least not through the suggestion boxes: A negative leading indicator for employee participation and more generally "respect for people."
5. **Floor-to-ceiling (or close-to-ceiling) office cubicles.** How many jobs really need that kind of isolation? Why not seated privacy for those few? Leading indicator: Limited teamwork and cross-functional cooperation.

These are just a few leading indicators — there are thousands — that are clear at a glance. Can you suggest a few more?

What's your take? Please feel free to leave a comment below. Hamilton writes OldLeanDude.org *[1], which is an ongoing reflection on Lean philosophy and practices with an emphasis on keeping good jobs close to home. Read more at* www.oldleandude.org *[1] and subscribe to receive new posts automatically to your inbox.*

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