Being There

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By BRUCE HAMILTON, Founder, OldLeanDude.org

A couple years ago, I was consulting in a large rolling mill to help reduce late deliveries to customers. After walking the floor for the first time with an enthusiastic 20-something engineer (let's call him Mark), I asked for help with observation at a particular point in the factory where inventory was queuing up.

He offered to go to the floor each day at 8:30 a.m. to check inventory levels and operational availability. He would capture a snapshot of conditions each day for three weeks before my return visit.

I asked him to do this not so much because I needed the numbers, but rather to stimulate his interest in direct observation. During my three-week absence, I spoke with Mark several times by phone, and each time he assured me that was going to the floor every day at 8:30 as requested — all systems go.

On my return visit, as Mark met me in the lobby, I said, "Let's go the floor." Off we went, but not to the factory.

At first, I thought we were stopping by Mark's office on the way to the floor, but I soon realized that Mark had a different understanding. As he sat at his desk and logged into his computer, I repeated that we should go to the floor first.

To my surprise, he responded, "Yes, we'll 'be there' in a second." I realized, at that moment, that there might be a generational communication barrier. I asked hesitantly, "Did you use your *computer* to 'go to the floor for last three weeks'?"

"Yes," he replied, "every day at 8:30. I've captured all the data in Excel. Just let me

record this morning's numbers."

An involuntary laugh escaped from my mouth as I explained my understanding of "going to the floor." Mark politely responded that the information from "the system" was in *real time* and that he was avoiding the waste of a long walk each day by using the power of information technology (IT).

I think he felt he was giving an old dude some advice. So, I said, "Real time, eh. Let's take a long walk and compare your definition of being there with mine."

"Sure," he said confidently, and off we marched with the data he had just printed out.

The rest of the story, you can pretty much guess. Mark's virtual floor bore no relationship to actual conditions. A heat-treat area that was apparently fully operational in Mark's world was *actually* down in mine. Inventory queues, apparently stabilized from the Excel viewpoint, were *actually* far worse than during my previous visit.

Mark incredulously glanced at his report and then hailed an operator at the scene to inquire if these conditions had "just happened." He still was not ready to let go of virtual reality. "No," replied the operator, "we've be touch-and-go all week."

I said to Mark, "Welcome to *my* world."

So many times in my work and personal life, language gets in the way of understanding. I'm an enthusiastic user of information automation, but it's not so interwoven into my life that I would think that "going to the floor" could imply such third-order observation as staring at a computer screen.

When my daughter (also 20-something) refers to texting as "talking to my friends," I feel compelled to argue that, while texting is a form of communication, it's not "talking." And talking on the phone is not even close to a face-to-face meeting.

These distinctions seem obvious enough to me, but I fear they are becoming blurred by our 21st Century automation fascination. For example, today even "face-to-face" is taking on a new meaning. Through the miracle of marketing [1], the term "telepresence" has recently entered our lexicon with the promise to "connect team members face to face with an exceptional user experience [2]." The technology provides an exciting and rapidly developing capability to communicate frequently over long distances sans jet lag and lost travel time.

But will I sound like a caveman if I suggest that impressive as this latest real-time communication is, it is *not* face to face in my world any more than Mark's computer screen. I think "screen-to-screen" might be a more accurate description of telepresence.

We only see where the camera is pointed. No peripheral vision — and what about those other forgotten senses, like smell and touch?

There is something to presence that cannot be virtual. Watching a wide-screen LCD monitor, even in high-definition, is still very different from actually being there. Anyone who has been frozen with vertigo at the ridge of the Grand Canyon understands that.

But sometimes we fail to make this distinction in the workplace. We turn to technology, thinking it will enhance our abilities to communicate. Charlie Chaplin's 1930's classic, *Modern Times*, predicted a time (even before television was invented) when we could "go to the floor" virtually:

His cinematic satire seems to be taking us back to the future, a future where being there is replaced with video cameras and flat screens.

So why is being there so important to lean? Please give me your thoughts — and I'll have a bit more to say about this in my next blog.

What's your take? Please feel free to leave a comment below. Hamilton writes OldLeanDude.org *[3], 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 *[3] and subscribe to receive new posts automatically to your inbox.*

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