

The Maintenance Storeroom Nobody Wants to Talk About

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Ricky Smith, CMRP, CMRT

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Every reliability improvement initiative I've ever been part of eventually runs into the same wall: the storeroom.

You can have the best planners, the most skilled technicians, and a world-class CMMS. If your storeroom is a mess, your maintenance execution will be, too. I've seen jobs delayed for hours (sometimes days) because a part that was "in stock" according to the system couldn't actually be found. Or it was the wrong one. Or it had been sitting on a shelf so long the seals had dry-rotted.

Nobody wants to talk about the storeroom because fixing it isn't glamorous. There's no conference keynote about bin labeling. But this is where the rubber meets the road for maintenance execution.

The Storeroom Problems Hiding in Plain Sight

Phantom Inventory

The CMMS says you have four of a particular bearing in stock. The planner builds a job plan around that. The tech shows up to pull the part, and the bin is empty. Or it has two bearings of a different series that someone stuck there because "they're close enough."

Phantom inventory is the single biggest planning killer I encounter in the field. It breaks the scheduling process, creates emergency purchases at premium prices, and destroys the planner's credibility with the crew.

The Toolbox Stash

You know it exists. Every plant has at least one senior tech who keeps a personal inventory in their toolbox, their locker, or tucked behind equipment in their area. They've been burned too many times by the storeroom, so they hoard.

I get it. I understand why they do it. But those parts aren't tracked, they aren't rotated, and when that person is out sick or retires, nobody knows they're there. Meanwhile, the CMMS shows zero on hand, so purchasing orders more.

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No Min/Max Standards

Ask a storeroom clerk why they have 47 of a particular V-belt, and you'll get a shrug. Ask why they have zero of a critical pump seal, and you'll get another shrug. Without min/max levels tied to equipment criticality and lead times, storeroom inventory is just accumulation. It's not management.

What a Functional Storeroom Actually Looks Like

I've worked with a handful of plants over the years whose storerooms were dialed in. The difference is night and day. Here's what they all had in common:

Functional Storeroom	Dysfunctional Storeroom
Every part has a unique ID tied to an asset in the CMMS.	Parts labeled with handwritten tape or not labeled at all.
Min/max levels set by criticality and lead time.	Reorder happens when someone notices the shelf is empty.
Controlled access with checkout/check-in tracking.	Open shelving with no transaction records.
Regular cycle counts reconciled with CMMS data.	Annual physical inventory (maybe) that never matches the system.
Shelf life and storage conditions monitored.	Elastomers and lubricants sitting in direct sunlight for years.

Five Steps to Start Fixing It This Month

You won't fix a neglected storeroom overnight. But you can make meaningful progress quickly if you focus on the right things first.

- **Reconcile your critical spares first.** Identify the spare parts associated with your top 20% critical assets. Physically verify that those parts are on the shelf, in the right condition, and correctly entered in the CMMS. Do this before anything else.
- **Lock the door.** Controlled access is non-negotiable. If anyone can walk into the storeroom and grab parts without a transaction, your inventory data will never be accurate. This is the hill to die on.
- **Establish min/max levels for critical spares.** Use equipment criticality ranking and supplier lead times to set reorder points. Start with insurance spares for your most critical equipment and work outward.
- **Purge the dead stock.** Every storeroom has shelves full of parts for equipment that was decommissioned years ago. Get rid of it. Sell it, scrap it, or return it. Dead stock takes up space, confuses counts, and ties up capital.
- **Implement cycle counting.** Forget the annual wall-to-wall inventory. Count a small section every week, rotating through the storeroom continuously. Weekly cycle counts will catch discrepancies before they become planning disasters.

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The Storeroom Is a Maintenance Function

Here's something that still surprises me after 35 years: in many organizations, the storeroom reports to procurement or finance, not maintenance. The people managing parts for maintenance execution don't report to anyone in maintenance.

That creates a natural disconnect. Procurement optimizes for purchase price and inventory carrying cost. Maintenance needs the right part, in the right condition, available when the planner says it should be. Those two objectives conflict constantly when nobody's mediating them.

The best-run plants I've seen either have the storeroom reporting directly to the maintenance manager or have a dedicated warehouse/inventory control position that sits within the maintenance organization. The reporting structure matters because it determines whose priorities drive storeroom decisions.

The Real Cost of a Bad Storeroom

Plants love to track maintenance labor cost and parts cost separately. But the biggest cost driver is often invisible: wrench time lost to parts chasing.

Industry benchmarks put average wrench time at 25% to 35% in most plants. That means technicians spend 65% to 75% of their day on things other than actual repair work. A significant chunk of that non-productive time is spent looking for parts, waiting for parts, or making trips back and forth to the storeroom.

Fix the storeroom, and you'll see wrench time improve. Wrench time improves, and schedule compliance goes up. Schedule compliance goes up, and MTBF starts to climb. It's all connected, and the storeroom is sitting at the center of it.

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Author



[Ricky Smith, CMRP, CMRT](#)

Ricky Smith, CMRP, CMRT is the Vice President of World Class Maintenance and a leading Maintenance Reliability Consultant with over 35 years of experience. He holds certifications such as Certified Maintenance and Reliability Professional (CMRP) and Certified Maintenance and Reliability Technician (CMRT). Ricky has worked with global companies like Coca-Cola, Honda, and Georgia Pacific, delivering expert maintenance solutions across 30 countries. His career began in the U.S. Army, advancing to leadership roles, including a position at the Pentagon as Facility Investigator for the Secretary of Defense. Ricky is also the co-author of *Rules of Thumb for Maintenance and Reliability Engineers* and *Lean Maintenance: Reduce Costs, Improve Quality, and Increase Market Share*.

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