

When I first started, Blind Rudy was the Plant Manager. Blind Rudy was blind as a bat with advanced glaucoma. He could not legally drive and only had limited peripheral vision. He walked through the factory like he could see, but the reality was he could not and everyone knew it. He would walk through twice a day yelling out that this was “POOR” and that housekeeping “SUCKED” and that he wanted “WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE” for this mess or that mess, that he could not see, but believed was there somewhere, and that a could Plant Manager always yells, and that housekeeping was always a good topic. The result of all this yelling did have an upside. You always knew when he was in the factory, and we could all effectively avoid him. It was sort of an adult work place version of blind man’s bluff, with a real blind guy who was always “it”. And for some reason, maybe in a lean book on tape or something, he was absolutely hung up on vertical space.

“We have got to use our vertical space more efficiently” he proclaimed one day in a supervisors meeting. I had, like so often in my career, absolutely no idea what this meant or where it was headed, but from the emotion and tone of the proclamation, I certainly did agree we were not using our vertical space efficiently at all, and nodded knowingly as he went on for a few minutes. I hope he knew it was me nodding since I really did not want to get whacked for being opposed to something as obvious as the need to use our vertical space more efficiently whatever that was.

“Bearded One” he shouted and swiveled in my direction “You are the new man here, and I can tell you have the same vision as I do” which I guess means I was blind as a bat in his eyes, which must be a good thing since I had clearly overcome this disability and had risen to my current station in life as a second shift supervisor in Nebraska, only ten years after graduating college and only five years after getting my Masters Degree.

“Bearded One, the equipment arrives tomorrow afternoon, make it happen by the weekend”!

Yes sir, you can count on me” I said again nodding vigorously in agreement with the mission. Now if I could only figure out what it was, I was confident the maintenance guys, who loved to screw with me in their cutesy “we are over 60 and in the Union and we do not really give a hoot, and are only on second shift to pad our pensions” manner, would excel at screwing up the vertical space project, and we would all be able work Sunday fixing whatever failed – them for double time, and me for free.

Well the next afternoon the first of six trucks pulled in. They were filled with pallet racks. Stack after stack of pallet racks that would give us a racking system than was 40 foot high. And now I understood! We were not using vertical space efficiently! And if we put up racks, we would be able to use it! All I had to do was move all the crap in the factory, all the materials, all

the machines, the baking ovens, the flour silos, and all those other 20 ton things bolted to the floor for decades, put in some racks, and dang, we would be efficient.

And I was the up and comer that was going to do it. And then it hit me that moving everything around in a 200,000 square foot bakery might take me longer than the rest of the week. It might take longer than a month, and that was not going to sit well at all with the blind Plant Manager. The first night we got less than 1% of the racks in. The next night was worse, the 3rd night went ok, but we were at less than 5% of the total project done and I was out of time. I only had the first tiers up and they were far from reaching the ceilings. My "Up and Coming" career was heading more towards "Down and Out". There would be yelling too, because he liked to yell.

So I did the only logical thing. I lied and told him all the racks were up and "Hey, they looked great". I hid the ones I did not have up out behind the Quonset hut and proudly took him on a tour. I pointed out how they practically popped through the ceiling waving my arm around pointing at things that were not there. And the blind plant manager bought the whole thing. Lock stock and barrel. He became convinced that they were up, shook my hand and said "Damn, you are a can do kind of guy". To which I replied "Hey, that's what you pay me for" while giving a confident shrug and slight smile.

He then e-mailed me asking for pictures, since at the big meeting in Alabama, he need pictures for his power point presentation about efficiency and the use of vertical space. I was prepared for this, and drove down to UPS and took pictures of their high racks, and photo shopped out all the guys in brown uniforms. I also continued to work on installing the racks, and after two months was done, just in time for round two of the utilizing vertical space project.

Round Two came about when it was noticed the racks were all empty. We had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the racks and labor to install them, and they were empty. I do not know who tipped off Blind Rudy, but he was told and he was pissed and he was yelling, but fortunately not at me because I was a "doer", I had gotten the racks we did not need installed.

"It seems as though we had developed an efficient method of utilizing vertical space, and YOU ARE NOT USING IT" politely explained Blind Rudy as veins popped on his head. "WE ARE NOT EFFICIENT..." and he just went on and on until the last part where he dictated "...and we MUST NOT INCREASE INVENTORY when filling the racks! These things need to be used wisely and judiciously BUT I WANT THEM USED in a RATIONAL way".

My peers took the rational part to heart and started increasing lot sizes on difficult to set up jobs. They would basically run double, triple or quadruple the lot size and there by save on set up time and gain higher efficiencies. Since most of these guys were reasonably sharp, they focused on the jobs that had really seen their lot sizes cut too much at the beginning of a wave

of “Lean if you say so” initiatives, one where you cut lot sizes before doing the SMED work or other process improvements that let you cut lot sizes in a real lean environment. And we got some decent results, with efficiencies increasing and service nudging up as well. Inventory went up too, but not by much and some racks began to fill. Blind Rudy was pleased. The efficient use of vertical space was paying dividends, and his star, if he could see it, was rising, almost liken the star of Bethlehem. Wise men would soon come to the blind baby Rudy Jesus and give him gifts. His mother was still a virgin so he did not have to wonder what his parents looked like having sex anymore. It sounded all good, except he forgot about the crucifixion part. That was certainly a big “owie” no matter whether they used ropes to bind you or the nails in the hands or wrists, depending on the scholarly interpretation. Geez, picking your favorite death by Roman torture is not really a wide range of options. Those bastards were as sadistic as they come, at least until the Fortune 500 came along (especially Caligula’s babysitters, the GE guys).

But blind Rudy was in his fantasy manager mode, sort of like Ralphie with his Red Ryder BB gun, and he did not think of the crucifixion. He yelled a lot less.

The first hit of heroin can be addictive, and we all knew we needed to keep filling the racks to gain the benefits of efficient usage of vertical space, so we planned and planned and did math and drew flow charts and just went ape shit crazy trying to be the smartest guy in the room, and then we just doubled all the lot sizes and built a lot of stuff. And the racks filled. And efficiency improved. But inventory sort of puked. Sort of a really bad puke. Very pukey puke of the pukiest sort. Not good puke.

Fortunately we had gained some breathing room from improved efficiencies, directly related to the excellent and now corporate wide initiative on increased efficiencies through vertical space utilization initiative, we were able to lie our way out of it for a month or two, with some pretty good power points.

From my perspective it was time to duck and cover. The inventory thing was going to become a cash thing, and we were going to get slaughtered like big fat cows. The building inventory in larger lot size thing was not going to save anyone’s job, and would in fact cause a lot of folks to lose their jobs if it continued. I immediately cut my lot sizes. When Blind Rudy yelled “WE MUST STAY THE COURSE AND FILL THE RACKS” I of course nodded my head, even more vigorously, and encouraged my young counterparts to STAY THE COURSE. This inventory thing was just a passing initiative, and the real results demonstrated filling the racks was a good thing.

In reality though, while officially advocating the “Stay the Course” policy, I kept cutting my lot sizes. I was not stupid. Inventory equals cash, and in a financial roll-up, especially a fruitcake

roll-up, cash was king. Since I was on second shift, I could build and place significantly under filled and if necessary empty cardboard boxes on my racks, keeping the racks filled while LOWERING INVENTORY. So while my peers were filling the racks with candy bits and jellied rolls, I was filling them with air.

Inventory for the plant kept going up though, and soon corporate sent a boarding party of lean experts, the CFO and a cadre accountants, a QA guy, and for some reason a marketing intern, which was okay since she was kind of hot but she served no purpose anyone of us could see (it turned out the CFO thought she was hot and wanted to help “round out” her experience). We had some big meetings and then they went away. Inventory kept going up.

Then they came back, and had private meetings with Blind Rudy, all ten of them including the hot intern squeezed into a room. Then they went away. Inventory kept going up.

Then they came back, with manufacturing stars from other factories to “help”. The first helped by asking a ton of questions and reviewing each department’s labor productivity, quality ratings, and operating costs. My quality was good, and even though I had lowered lots sizes, I had figured a couple of ways to make the productivity improve, including one real productivity improvement. Most of the rest came from transferring labor to maintenance to paint the bathroom, but more on that later. And one thing also stood out – mine was the only department in the plant on track to hit their inventory number. I was starting to look pretty good to the boarding party.

One day I came in and Blind Rudy was gone. Even though there was no announcement, I saw Cowboy Bob had added another trophy to his case. He had added Blind Rudy’s magnifying glass. Nothing more needed to be said.

One of the boarding party from corporate was announced as the new Plant Manager. He had worked in accounting and had never worked in Manufacturing, but he was sleeping with one of the owner’s ex-girlfriends in HR, so he was moving up, and this was a stepping stone. He looked to be about 22 years old, but was probably 27 or 28. Let’s call him the junior Accountant and move on with the story. They also whacked a couple of supervisors, which was fine, since they did not get any of the really bad ones and I would still look good relatively speaking.

The Junior Accountant had something whispered into his ear by the CFO, and it was along the lines of the racks being the problem. The CFO felt we were running large lot sizes to gain efficiency rather than doing Lean things and SMED work to eliminate waste. He thought we put up the racks to “rat hole” inventory and that only by taking them down could we be “forced” to do lean. The racks were enabling waste so had to go.

The Junior Accountant got us all together the next day and declared the racks were the problem, and they must come down IMMEDIATELY. Each department was responsible to deliver RESULTS and all the RAT-HOLING was to stop now, and we were all to become LEAN ORGANIZATIONS. I nodded my head vigorously, showing I was in complete agreement, and said "I'll have my department done by Monday". I could tell I was getting dagger eyes from the other supervisors, but I did not care, I was an up and comer.

Now this was really easy for me to say, since my racks were basically full of empty cartons. The other departments were in a pickle because their boxes actually had stuff in them, and they would need to put it somewhere. Floor space would become a premium item really fast. As they took their racks down, their floors filled. Materials blocked aisles and fire exits, setting the Safety guy off. Forklifts had to take long circuitous routes to move materials from one end of the department to the other. Efficiencies fell. Materials got mixed up as fruitcake customer received the wrong fruit cakes, sometimes even empty boxes (from where I do not know). Whole departments looked like the warehouse Indiana Jones lost the Ark of the Covenant to.

My area on the other hand looked pretty good. We took down the boxes, and folded them back down into flat boxes, and put them in the cardboard area. This would in fact help me gain on my operating expenses as my shipping box budget went to next to nothing for three months due to all boxes returned to stock. I pulled down the racks in my department and put them out in the Quonset hut, and then sent some guys to paint the bathroom in order to transfer that labor out of my area.

The Junior Accountant noticed the big results in my area, and said "Damn, you are a can do kind of guy". To which I replied "Hey, that's what you pay me for" while giving a confident shrug and slight smile.

Three months later the Junior Accountant was gone, his romance with the owner's ex-girlfriend in HR hit a rock when he started tapping the hot young marketing intern, and the CIA Guy showed up. One of his first observations was that we did not seem use our vertical space well, and suggested we look at getting some racks up. I volunteered immediately; he smiled and said "ok, make it happen".

The maintenance guys had been watching the whole thing unfold, and walked over after the CIA Guy left and said "He's a racks up guy, ain't he"?

I said "Yep", and they headed to the Quonset hut.

The next day the CIA Guy comes in and says "Damn, you are a can do kind of guy". To which I replied "Hey, that's what you pay me for" while giving a confident shrug and slight smile.

