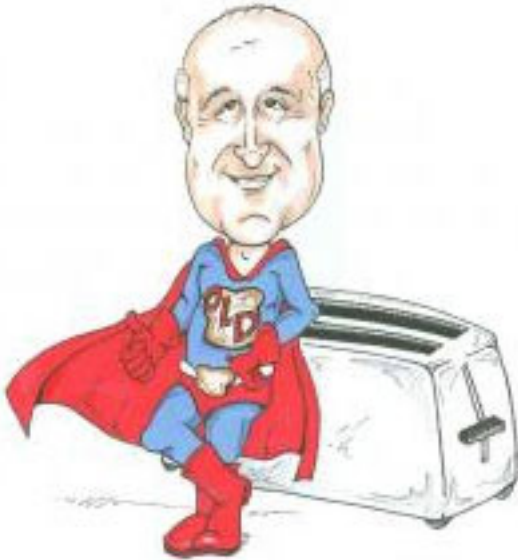


Being There

Bruce Hamilton, 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 *real-time* and that he was avoiding the waste of a long walk each day by using the power of IT. I think he felt he was giving an old dude some advice. So I said,

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“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 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, the term “telepresence” has recently entered our lexicon with the promise to “[connect team members face-to-face with an exceptional user experience](#) [1].” 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 hi-def, is just 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* [2]. His cinematic satire seems to be taking us back to the future, a future where *being there* is replaced with video cams and flat screens. (BTW: This is the first of nine clips which comprise the entire movie. You don’t want to miss the Bellow’s Automatic Feeding Machine demonstration in later clips.)

So why is *being there* so important to Lean?

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[OldLeanDude.org](http://www.oldleandude.org) [3] is written by Bruce Hamilton (aka The Toast Guy from the best-selling Toast Kaizen lean training DVD and president of GBMP, Inc.).

[Oldleandude.org](http://www.oldleandude.org) is an on-going reflection on Lean philosophy and practices with an emphasis on keeping good jobs close to home. Read more at www.oldleandude.org [4] and subscribe to receive new posts automatically to your inbox. We sincerely hope you'll join in on the discussion.

GBMP helps develop a strong and vibrant regional economy through training in continuous improvement principles and is the administrator of The Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence in the Northeast. GBMP's annual conference is the lean event of the year. Contact Anna.Wells@advantagemedia.com [5] for syndication.

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