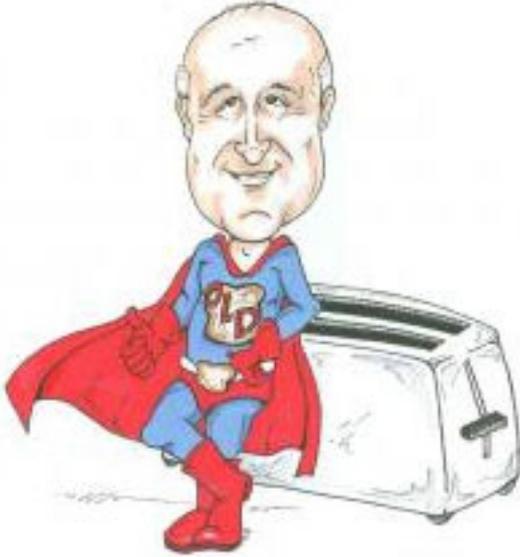


## Waiting For Godot

Bruce Hamilton, OldLeanDude.org



Samuel Beckett's modern [drama](#) [1] about two hobos, Vladimir and Estragon, monotonously passing time while waiting for their friend Godot (who never shows during the entire play) reminds me of another kind of meaningless waiting that I often observe in organizations. "Waiting" is, of course, one of the seven wastes. It's not uncommon to see either workers or machines idle because of inconsistency in material or information flow. But this is *not* the waiting I'm thinking of here. I'm thinking of the waiting caused by managers or engineers who for one reason or another are disinclined to take action on improvement. These folks are "waiting for Godot," or as some persons have interpreted Beckett's title, "waiting to go do it." Here are some examples:

*Overheard from a design engineer: "Yes, we agree there is a problem calibrating the existing product, but the employee suggestion doesn't need to be implemented now because we're correcting the problem on the new design. Let's just wait [for Godot] on this one."*

The promise of the new design to fix all problems is alluring, but this delays the learning that would occur if the problem were addressed, even partially, at an earlier time. Worse, this response is demoralizing to workers who essentially hear that their ideas are not important and they should continue to live in pain while the "big brains" solve the problem. Lean thinking says, [fix problems instantly](#) [2]. No waiting.

Given the legacy of computer system "enhancements" there is ample reason to be skeptical about this. It has the same liabilities as the previous example.

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*Here's a variation on that theme, this time from a manager: "The proposed patient scheduling solution fixes only 25% of the problem instances we've observed. Let's wait until we have a more complete solution."*

This is a common reason for waiting to act, but why wait?

Lean thinking recommends "A 50% solution today is better than 90% six months from now. We will learn from our incremental improvement and also progressively pare down the problem.

*Sometimes the waiting occurs on a larger scale. Here is a comment from a plant manager: "Let's not try to improve any of the floor layout until we move into the new plant next year."*

Like the other comments above, this recommendation may be well-intentioned, but the result is many months of delay in learning about the process of layout improvement. The manager's rationale seems reasonable, but it's exactly wrong. I once heard a manager who had waited, reflect "If we'd practiced the new thinking *before* our move, we probably wouldn't have even needed this new building." The learning that occurs through practice will inevitably result in a better new floor design and a smoother transition because everyone — managers, engineers and workers — will have a chance to understand why and how the improvements are made. Practice is important. Scrimmages and rehearsals lead to better performance. Don't wait.

In the queue of urgent versus important tasks, lean implementation frequently falls down the list. Hot orders, new product releases, computer system roll-outs, quality audits, year-end pushes and vacation schedules are common reasons to wait (for Godot). There are many more. [We wait](#) [3] to be acted upon rather than to take action. Beckett's masterpiece ends pretty much as it begins, with this dialog:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

After walking the factory floor with a company owner many years ago we discussed a serious safety hazard we had seen in his factory. When he commented to me, "We need to fix that immediately," I stood up to go back to the floor. "Oh, no. Not *now*," he said. I asked him what he meant by "immediately" and he replied "Sometime in the next month."

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What's your definition of immediately? Is someone in your organization waiting for Godot?

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[OldLeanDude.org](http://OldLeanDude.org) [4] 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 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](http://www.oldleandude.org) [5] 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](mailto:Anna.Wells@advantagemedia.com) [6] for syndication.

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### Links:

- [1] <http://www.amazon.com/Waiting-Godot-Tragicomedy-Two-Acts/dp/0802130348>
- [2] <http://www.amazon.com/JIT-Factory-Revolution-Pictorial-Design/dp/0915299445>
- [3] <http://oldleandude.com/2011/01/05/taking-the-plunge/>
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