

A SHORT GUIDE FOR MANUFACTURING LEADERS

# From Hectic to Harmony

The three things behind the problems  
that keep coming back in your operation



## SOUND FAMILIAR?

# Everyone is working hard. So why does it still feel hectic?

- Orders go out late, even though everyone is working flat out.
- The same problems keep coming back, day after day.
- Firefighting has become part of the normal way of working.
- The pressure always lands on the same few people.
- Quality issues are quietly eating into your margins.
- You can't step away without things starting to slip.

This is rarely down to poor people, low effort or a lack of capability. The design of the operation makes it hard for your people to do the right thing consistently.

## THE THREE THINGS

# It all comes back to three things

Every problem in your operation traces back to these, even the ones that feel out of your control.



### Direction

Everyone knows what needs to happen today, this week, this month, this year and beyond, and why it matters.



### System

Standards, processes, tools for the job, lines of communication, and the daily rhythms and routines that help people deliver.



### Habits

What people do day in, day out, how leaders lead, and how everyone responds when problems show up.

When all three are in place, what **should** happen **does** happen. **That's harmony.**

EVERY PART HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

# Think of an orchestra

Each of the three things has a direct match in an orchestra.



## Direction

The conductor and the set list. Everyone knows what they're playing, when to come in, and why it matters. Miss a cue and the whole piece suffers.



## System

The instruments and the sheet music. Every instrument is in tune and in good repair, and the sheet music sets out how each part should be played.



## Habits

How well the musicians play. Practised, consistent, and listening to each other.

Take any one away and the orchestra will still make a sound. It just won't be music.



THE FIRST THING

# Direction

Direction means clarity and alignment on what needs to happen, when it needs to happen, and why it matters.

When that's clear, people can see how today's work fits into the bigger picture.

## Without it

People fill the gap with their own version of what matters most. The result:

**Confusion**

**Wasted effort**

**Frustration**

**And people who can't see why their work matters soon stop caring about it.**

**On the shop floor:** if you ask three supervisors what matters most this week and get three different answers, each of them is working hard, just not on the same thing.

## DIRECTION

# Where it goes wrong

- Direction is clear at the top but doesn't reach the shop floor.
- Vision and mission statements are too vague to shape daily priorities.
- Competing priorities pull people in different directions.
- People can't see how their work links to the bigger picture.

## Ask yourself

1

Can your people explain what success looks like this year?

2

Are people at every level clear on what needs to happen today, and why?

3

What have you done to get them aligned, and if it hasn't worked, why not?



THE SECOND THING

# System

System means the structure that helps people deliver against the direction.

Standards

Processes

Tools for the job

Lines of communication

Daily rhythms and routines

## Without it

A weak system makes it hard for people to do the right thing, however motivated they are. The result:

Delays

Rework

Firefighting

**A strong system removes the friction, so your people can deliver great results.**

**On the shop floor:** if the same issue is raised at the morning meeting day after day and nobody can say who owns it, that's a system problem, not a people problem.

## SYSTEM

# Where it goes wrong

- Performance isn't visible, so people can't see how they're doing.
- Lines of communication are unclear, inconsistent or broken.
- Issues have no clear home, so nothing tracks them through to a fix.
- Standards exist but aren't easy to find or use.

## Ask yourself

- 1 How clearly can people see how they're performing against what's needed?
- 2 How are you driving daily conversations between teams and departments?
- 3 Where are issues recorded, and can you see who is doing what by when?



THE THIRD THING

# Habits

Habits means what people do day in, day out, how leaders lead, and how everyone responds when problems show up.

Research by Wendy Wood and colleagues suggests around 43% of what we do each day is habit, and the workplace, with its repeated tasks and cues, is fertile ground.

## Without the right ones

Direction and system won't stick. The result:

**Quality and safety slip**

**Results you can't rely on**

**Problems keep coming back**

**Your operation is already running on habits. The only question is whether they're the right ones.**

**On the shop floor:** if a leader walks past a skipped check and says nothing, skipping it soon becomes the habit.

## HABITS

# Where it goes wrong

Usually the hardest of the three. New habits take repetition, and old ones pull people back.

- Standards slip bit by bit, until something goes wrong.
- Problems get fixed on the spot, but the fix never sticks.
- Saving the day gets noticed and thanked. Preventing the problem goes unseen.
- People copy what leaders do, not what they say.

## Ask yourself

1

How often do you see standards being reviewed and updated?

2

How are you actively developing your people's habits?

3

Are your leaders acting the way you'd like everyone to act?

WHEN ONE IS MISSING

# Two out of three isn't enough

Missing: Direction

**Busyness**

People work hard and follow the process, but their effort is pulling in different directions.

Missing: System

**Chaos**

Everyone knows the goal and works hard, but there's no agreed way of working, so everyone does it their own way.

Missing: Habits

**Stagnation**

The processes exist on paper, but they aren't followed consistently, so the same problems keep coming back.

**All three together: harmony.** What **should** happen **does** happen, without you having to chase it.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

# The wrong fix makes things worse

In the day-to-day, symptoms are obvious. Causes aren't. So leaders often fix the wrong thing.

**FIXED: SYSTEM    NEEDED: HABITS**

**New software. Six months on, hardly anyone uses it.**

The software was fine. The habit of using it was missing.

**FIXED: HABITS    NEEDED: DIRECTION**

**A leadership course for supervisors. No change.**

They could lead. They didn't know what mattered most.

**FIXED: DIRECTION    NEEDED: SYSTEM**

**A new strategy launch. A month on, business as usual.**

Nothing in the daily routine turned it into action.

Every wrong fix costs time and money, and makes people more cynical about the next one.

**Get the diagnosis right first.**

IN SHORT

# Next time you think "I wish they would just..."

Stop and ask which of the three is really missing.



**Direction**



**System**



**Habits**

The problems that keep coming back aren't random, and they aren't down to people not caring. When all three are in place, you get harmony. When one is missing, you get busyness, chaos or stagnation.

**The good news:** once you know where the root cause sits, you can do something about it.

## YOUR CHALLENGE

# What's really behind it?

Take a few minutes, and be honest with yourself.

- 1 What's the biggest challenge in your operation right now?
- 2 What is it costing you, your people and the business?
- 3 What happens if nothing changes?
- 4 Which of the three do you think is behind it: Direction, System or Habits?

That last one is the hardest to get right from the inside. **Test your answer with the four-minute health check** on the next page.

YOUR NEXT STEP

# Find out where your gap really is

The health check takes four minutes. You'll see how hectic things really are, which of the three is most likely behind it, and where to look first.

**Take the health check** →

[www.better-everyday.co.uk/health-check](http://www.better-everyday.co.uk/health-check)



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I'm a leadership coach with a background in Operational Excellence. I work with manufacturing leaders to build clarity, consistency and trust into their operations, so performance becomes predictable rather than stressful.

